The Golden Snail

Victor MacClure

December 17, 193

To Daddy From
Vernon and
Wylda.

Happy
Birthday!

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THE GOLDEN SNAIL

THE GOLDEN SNAIL

A FANTASY OF LONDON

By

VICTOR MacCLURE

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TO

MY GOOD FRIENDS

OF "THE CHALET," BRIDPORT,

DORSET

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LONDON RIVER

THE dawn comes up like thunder
  On the Road to Mandalay,
But it creeps upon you quietlike
  Down river, Limehouse way;
Though Bugsby's Reach blows up the
    scents
  Of bone-manure and glue,
The sky, dove-gray and lemon,
  Warms to topaz shot with blue;
Then up and high the clouds pile up
  To white like drifted snow,
Through grays and tans and primrose
  From the sooted base below,
Where every tug and freighter
  Belches smoke to greet the day—
Ah! You give me London river!
  You can *have* your Mandalay!

The sun sets on the Bosphorus
  In glory, I am told;
But behind the Chelsea power-house
  I've seen a richer gold.
When the windows by the river
  Are lit up in twos and threes,
And the glare of high-swung arc lamps
  Makes black fretwork of the trees;
When the four big shafts of Chelsea
  Are like tall blue fairy spires,
And the mud flats of the river
  Are aglow with liquid fires—
And a moldering barge that's stranded
  Gives a touch that's gaunt, forlorn—
Ah! You give me London river!
  You can *keep* the Golden Horn!

From "The Pomes of Pete"

THE GOLDEN SNAIL

CHAPTER I

THE LITTLE BILL

I would it were my fault to sleep so soundly!
SHAKEPEARE

I

HIGH among the roofs of a back street of Soho dwelt Percival Pemblebury.

The street thus honored was not so much a street as an *impasse,* nor yet so much an *impasse* as a courtyard. At one time, no doubt, there must have been a plot of greenery in the middle of Timkins's Yard. To begin with, there was room enough in the Yard, and the old-fashioned cobblestones that paved it broke off in the center to enclose a wide patch of macadam. On one side of Timkins's Yard the decaying houses, now tenement dwellings of a not too sanitary arrangement, still preserved a façade of dignity, well proportioned, and showing various

Georgian ornamentations, gentlemanly refinements indicating some knowledge on the part of the builder of the proportions of Palladio and Vitruvius. The ironwork which ran in front of the façade and mounted on either side of the broad front steps of the doorways was beautifully wrought. It attained its most attractive perfection in four lamp standards, a pair of which guarded each of the two doors of the old houses, and on the right-hand standard of either pair was to be seen the inverted trumpet of a link extinguisher.

It was easy, then, for the chance frequenter of the Yard, despite the ever-prevalent odor of garlic, tomato *purée,* vinegar and crude olive-oil; despite the presence in the gutters of sloe-eyed, peachy-skinned, jet-haired, and dirty but engaging brats—it was easy, then, to conjure up a picture of powdered ladies and gallants, befrilled, befurred, besworded, furbelowed and patched, of sedan-chairs, footmen, flunkeys, high-swung coaches. The old houses with their plastered walls made an apt background for just such a picture. They had that umberish, greenish, shadowy tint, breaking into golden yellow and sienna, that you find in Hogarth and the later Pryde. True, the chance frequenter in his conjuration would have to eliminate detail. He would have to discard the frowsy hangings in the windows, no two of which were curtained alike; he

would have to discard the garbage cans, with their crazy lids perched perilously on top of their teeming contents, that littered the high pavement fronting the old houses with cabbage leaves, ashes, potato peelings, rags, cans, bottles, and a multifarious indescribability of decaying matter; he would have to discard the stout women of Southern complexion, or the incredibly withered old crones, pendulous of nose and huge of earrings, who sat on the broad doorsteps or on the edge of the high pavement, their feet in the bestrewn gutter, gesticulating with fat or clawlike fingers to the apparent danger of their eyes and noses. The chance frequenter would have to eliminate all that detail if he were to conjure up his Georgian picture.

Yet, without such elimination, without drawing over the scene the umbrageous hues of Hogarth or Pryde, a picture remained for the brush of a master, dramatic in its antitheses of ancient dignity and modern squalor.

At the time when we begin our story of the fortunes of Percival Pemblebury—who, by the gracious patience of the reader, must wait still a little until we create (if we can) that valuable preliminary scrumble known as "atmosphere"—at this time a straw-tinted flood of spring sunshine poured upon Timkins's Yard and transfigured it. It picked out in sharp detail every colorful thing in the scene—

the glowing scarf round a woman's brown throat, the gaudy cotton kerchief adorning the white head of a witchlike old creature with one protruding eye, the bright yellow hair of a dark-skinned *bambino,* the gold and green of a cabbage leaf or two—and it made a goblin jewel of a discarded sardine tin. It gave value to the strong yet delicate proportions of the scroll-supported canopies over the doors of the old houses. It defined the vari-tinted patches of plaster on the blistering walls—umber, sienna, gray, blue, black. It poured over the high brick wall facing the old houses, leaving that in warm shadow. The high brick wall was pierced by only two openings: one, an extraordinarily tall double doorway over which projected a stout beam supporting a large block reeved through with a thick rope; two, a square opening filled in with green-painted woodwork comprising door and window, over which depended a sign lettered "Stage Door." The magnificently plain brick wall enclosed the stage of a theater, and the high double door with its pendent rope was for the admission of tall pieces of scenery.

The pale straw flood poured over the shadowed brick wall and threw an erratic outline in a slant down the wooden front of a workshop which filled that side of the Yard lying between the theater and the old houses. The workshop was of wood and much gabled of frontage. It had many rows of

small-paned, irregular, dusty windows, close to which inside one could see toothless racks of tools, cobwebs, scraps of old ironware, and jam jars one instinctively knew to contain dried-up paint or varnish.

The workshop had no lower story, for it was perched on stout scantlings of wood filled in with a fencing of planks and corrugated iron. Over the top of this fencing, between it and the floor of the workshop, one caught a glimpse of stacked timber, rickety wooden steps up to the floor above, and, beyond these, bright patches of sunlit whitewashed walls. The fencing under the workshop was pasted here and there with posters; bright new specimens and dog-eared, dusty, ancient ones, on which the colors had long faded before the weather and grime of years.

Bright dust and a shadow or two. Old plastered walls thoughtfully proportioned, new walls of the most commercial brick proportioned only by the dictates of utility and yet, somehow, achieving a plainness more moving than eloquence and a dignity of their own. A cobbled courtyard backed by a crazy wooden structure, pierced by vistas of startlingly clean sunshine. An alien humanity frowsing on dirty pavements, cheek by jowl with odoriferous garbage cans that spill insanitary unnamabilities. And the whole blended, fused, yet thrown into sharp and

almost jeweled detail, given mass of shadow and of light by the clean sun of a London spring morning. So, at some length, most patient reader, you have Timkins's Yard, Soho.

II

On the topmost floor, the garret floor, of the Georgian house farthest from the archway by which one entered Timkins's Yard dwelt Percival Pemblebury. He had about thirty years behind him, no definite future as far as he knew before him, and, at the time when this history opens, one single halfpenny in his pocket. He was moderately tall, moderately slim, moderately gifted in the matter of looks. Black-haired, gray-eyed, brown-faced, white of teeth, with a smile ever in wait but reluctant to appear, Percival Pemblebury faced life with a careless certainty in his own mind that taken on the whole it was not such a bad old world.

The straw-tinted sunshine that illumined Timkins's Yard shone through the undrawn curtains and open window of Percival's sleeping apartment. At its first entrance it cast a bright strip anglewise over the scrubbed wood floor and up the gray-blue wall of the room. Minutes passed, and the bright strip traveled over floor and wall, widening as it traveled and swinging round in the direction of Percival's

bed. Presently its edge crept over Percival's pillow and touched the tangle of black hair adorning his placid head. With his face toward the window he slept peacefully on, a smile lurking on his lips. Then the beam fell across his eyes. On that instant Percival awoke, yawned, and put his hand under his pillow, only to withdraw it empty.

" 'Not there, not there, my child!' " he murmured. "But who needs a watch when there is a sun?"

He hung over the side of the bed and for a space regarded the slowly creeping edge of the sunbeam.

"Nine o'clock," he said positively, "or I'm a Dutchman and no scout."

For a moment he lay as he was; then, as if in confirmation of his surmise, the chiming of a near-by clock stole through the open window.

"I thought so," murmured Percival. "Get up, you lazy blighter!" he held conversation with himself. "Sluggard, awake! (I am awake, you goat!) Well, then, get up! You said you'd be up by half-past seven. (I know I did. 'Indeed, indeed, Repentance oft before I swore—but was I sober when I swore?') Get up. ('And then and then came Spring, and Rose-in-hand My thread-bare Penitence apieces tore.') Get up! (Oh, all right!)"

He threw back the bedclothes and sprang from his couch. As soon as his bare foot touched the floor Percival began to sing.

"In far-off land, by ways remote and hidden,
There stands a keep that men call Monsalvat.
It holds a shrine to the profane forbidden:
More precious there is naught on earth than
that. . . ."

It was Lohengrin's *Narration* he was singing, and for a time he got on quite well with it, while he lighted the stove and made preparations for shaving water and for breakfast. But the *Narration* is keyed for a tenor, and Percival might have been called a bass-baritone. When he came to declare that the Cup Immortal was "the Grail!" he made the declaration in rather a tenuous head voice, and he had to drop an octave. The result was that when he told the world in general that his father, Parsifal, reigned in his glory, and that he, personally, was his knight, Lohengrin by name, the announcement blared forth somewhere on an E flat of singular robustness.

"The English artist," said a stout Italian woman, sitting on the curb below, to the old crone of the protruding eye. "Behold! He has risen and is making his breakfast!"

"They say," said the other, ignoring what was apparently a self-evident proposition in favor of a more astonishing fact, "they say that he washes all over in cold water each morning!"

"It is true. Giovanni, who went upstairs to see where the water was coming from through the

ceiling on the morning after the English artist arrived, found him seated, quite naked, in a large vessel of green canvas. It was full of cold water, and the Englishman was singing loudly as he poured it over himself with a large sponge. He now puts down a waterproof sheet under the bath of canvas, and though no water comes through on us we know that he washes in cold water every morning."

"He is mad," the old woman averred.

"No. It is the English custom. The English love cold water."

"It is not healthy," said the crone with conviction.

"The Englishman is healthy enough, and merry-hearted. Listen! He is now singing *Questa quella* from *Rigoletto*. *Ah, Dio!*—but I remember——"

Every morning, rain or shine, Percival Pembleburry filled Timkins's Yard with song. It was perhaps fortunate that his immediate neighbors were Italians, and even then that Percival's voice was not unpleasing. No English neighbors would have borne it, true though the voice of Percival was, for the English breakfast is a meal at which gloom and a touch of liver are wont most often to preside. Percival gave voice even in the act of shaving, though his song during this operation was apt to become patchy, and the bath that followed the mowing of his chin always brought his vocalization to its best. The consumption of the well-brewed coffee

and rolls which constituted his frugal breakfast silenced him only for a time. It was not until he had settled down to the morning's work that the vocal recital finished.

On the morning that introduces Percival he examined the knees of his trousers with particular care and decided that this portion of his garments needed pressing. Thus, with the manipulation of a heavy iron and damp towel on the clean deal of a kitchen table, the song of Percival was unwontedly extended, and the listeners in the courtyard below heard more of the *arias,* both tenor and baritone, from a bigger selection of operas than even those who had gramophones had ever heard in one morning of their lives. But at last the nether garments of Percival boasted an elegant crease and were hung over a chair to dry, and the singer was ready for the morning's real task.

His preparation was simple. He donned a pair of paint-smeared flannel trousers and a sailor jersey. He arranged his easel so that the light fell justly on the canvas, and picked up his brushes. Business was business with Percival Pemblebury, and the picture on which he was engaged had passed that stage when painting is to a great extent mechanical. It was out of embryo and required concentration. Percival concentrated. The only sound that escaped from him in several hours was a subdued whistling

from between his teeth. The sound was hardly enough to break the silence. In this quiet a good opportunity is afforded for examining Percival's apartments.

III

A woman—almost any woman—would have shuddered at the monastic air which clung to the mansard inhabited by Percival Pemblebury, and almost any woman would have itched to make it more homelike. For the mansard apartments of Percival Pemblebury showed not the slightest trace of a woman's hand. Its walls, distempered a blue-gray, were bare of pictures. Its floor of scrubbed boards was uncarpeted save for a rush mat by the side of Percival's couch and one other by the heating stove. The only furniture in the place, besides the camp-bed, was the easel and painting desk, a large cupboard which held Percival's clothes as well as his canvases and drawing material, a plain kitchen table with two solid wooden chairs beside it and a bigger table which acted as a workbench. The one touch that might be called luxurious was to be found in the pair of long-seated wicker chairs which stood one on either side of the heating stove. The apartments consisted of two rooms opening into each other by a wide aperture, curtained with the same gray material as was hung on the windows. The

whole place was monastic of appearance. It had the scrubbed look of a clean ship. It was bare to the point of absolute comfort. A woman would have said it was a barrack.

The beam of sunlight that had wakened Percival swung steadily round. It broadened as it swung and, as the sun rose higher, the beam grew shorter until it left the now tidy couch and lay only on the bare boards of the floor. In the other room, where Percival painted with complete absorption in his work, a narrower beam traveled much in the same fashion as its fellow from the other room. It was attenuated to a thin spear by the narrow aperture left in the drawn curtains through which it penetrated. But it too shortened and broadened, then began to thin again as it came into an acuter angle with the lines of the floor-boards. At last it fell across Percival's face.

"Two o'clock," he murmured. "I thought so. The paunch cries 'cupboard.' "

Percival thoughtfully wiped his brushes on a rag and stood for a moment in silent contemplation of his work. Then he laid his brushes on his painting desk and prepared to sally forth.

He dressed, as was his habit, with extreme care, and none would have said that the well-pressed gray tweed suit was several years old. So neat was the set of his cravat in his collar, so resplendent the

polish on his brown shoes, so jaunty the slight cock of his well-brushed soft hat, so fair the texture of his well-washed chamois gloves and so rich the paten on his silver-knobbed cane, that none would ever have imagined his pockets contained but a single coin, a halfpenny. But it was so, and as it lay in the palm of his gloved hand Percival eyed the copper with something of a rueful smile.

"Let us count our wealth," he murmured, as he turned it over. "One halfpenny! 'Tis not so deep as a florin, nor so wide as a dollar; but 'twill serve. We must visit our dear Archambaud at the hostelry of the Golden Snail."

He walked down the stairs and into Timkins's Yard. Immediately he appeared on the doorstep a fair-haired Italian brat left off banging an old can on the curb and rushed at Percival to clasp him round a leg.

"God dig you good den, brave Salvatore!" Percival smiled. *"Buon giorno, bambinino*—and other Italian phrases!"

Salvatore held up the can for inspection.

"Never," said Percival gravely, "never in the whole course of my professional experience—and I am an artist, remember—never have I had the privilege of contemplating an old tomato can of more transcendent beauty. But I do recommend that you keep it off the leg of my trousers, young fellow!"

Salvatore was not yet bilingual, and English was beyond his compass, but he understood thoroughly that his tomato can was the object of respectful admiration, and hugging it to his round little stomach he grinned widely. Percival rapped him softly on the head with his cane by way of a parting salutation.

"*Ecco,* Cavalier' Salvatore, I dub thee knight!" he said with a smile that included the women about. "Hail and farewell, my Roman citizen!"

And Percival threaded his way, with ever so slight a swagger, out of Timkins's Yard, and into the Soho street leading toward L'Escargot d'Or.

IV

"It is no good, Monsieur Pemblebury," said Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet, proprietor of L'Escargot d'Or restaurant. "No longer can I allow your bill to run up. Already it assumes the dimensions too much inflated. Now you pay the bill, you understand, or eat no more in my restaurant. The tick is finish'!"

Percival Pemblebury flicked an imaginary speck from his sleeve. He was too impecunious not to be immaculate, he always said. He gazed sleepily into Laverdet's face.

"If I don't eat here, where else can I eat?" he asked.

"Is that my affair? Pay the bill or eat no more here!"

"But, my dear Archambaud," Percival said easily, "if I don't eat I shall die—you wouldn't like to have a cold corpse on your hands?"

"What have I to do with your corpse, *hein?*"

Percival pointed a gloved finger at his friend.

"I should walk the street starving," he explained. "Then, when the time came for my untimely demise, I should crawl to the threshold of L'Escargot d'Or there to expire in a distressingly emaciated condition. My death would be at your door—morally and literally."

Monsieur Laverdet grunted, but his eyes widened a trifle.

"Ah, yes," said he, "perhaps you starve, but perhaps also you start to do some work and earn money to pay the bill. Why don't you earn money? Other men do."

"My good, delightful Archambaud, the mansard which I dignify by the name of studio is bung full of pictures that no one will buy. If I could sell one—only one—certainly I should pay the bill. If I have one virtue," added Percival reverently, as one who deals with a sacred subject, "if I have one virtue besides not borrowing from my friends it is that I always pay for my food—ultimately. Why don't you buy a picture or so?"

Monsieur Laverdet folded his arms and nodded his head in the manner of a Continental cinema actor who would express exasperation.

"If cool cheek made success, *mon ami,*" he said, "you would be a millionaire. Already I have one picture by you. You run up a bill for twelve lunches, then you ask me to buy another. Yes, I think so—perhaps!"

Percival nonchalantly changed his line of attack.

"But it is a perfectly nice bill," he murmured. "I don't get your point at all. We were getting along splendidly, the little bill thriving merrily—then all of a sudden you want to stop. How much is the bill anyway?"

"Three pounds sixteen and fourpence ha'penny."

"Three and sevenpence ha'penny short of four pounds. Enough for one more lunch."

"Ah, I suppose you already think I owe you the three and sevenpence ha'penny?"

Percival stooped to pick up and fondle the restaurant cat, which was describing affectionate figures of eight about his ankles.

"The cat, my dear Archambaud," he said, "has more humanity than you have. Athanasius does not desert his friend for a matter of three and sevenpence ha'penny."

"It is not a matter of three and sevenpence ha'penny," said Monsieur Laverdet testily; "it is a matter of three sixteen four a half."

"Three sixteen four a half, then. Why not make it four pounds? The odd figures look so untidy. Let me recommend the round sum as much more satisfying—to the eye at least."

Laverdet unfolded his arms and extended them in a gesture of despair.

"You are incorrigible," he said. "Very well, then, let it be four pounds—but it is the last until you have paid the bill, you understand?"

The restaurant proprietor heaved a fat sigh.

"After all, what does it matter?" he continued. "Three shillings more or less when one is ruined."

"Ruined?"

"But yes. Ruined!" groaned the good Laverdet. "To the neck in the *potage bonne fermière,* as you would say. The restaurant does not pay—on the contrary, I lose money every day. The *déjeuner* is as good as any in the district at three and six—better—but enough people do not eat it. It is like your pictures, *mon ami,* they are splendid—*épatant*—but they are in demand by no one. Let us lunch together. I shall tell you the sad story. It will break your heart. One must eat though in despair, *n'est-ce pas?*"

As they lunched Laverdet poured out his tale of struggle and defeat. Frequently emotion choked his utterance but did not prevent his eating. He nearly spoiled his *poulet en casserole* with tears and introduced a considerable proportion of the same salt solution to his coffee.

"My good friend," said Percival in sympathetic tones, "a pinch of salt is quite a dodge in the making of coffee—but I have no opinion of tears as a flavoring once the coffee is made. Courage, *mon ami!* Things can not be as bad as you fancy. Surely something can be done. You aren't absolutely finished, are you?"

"No, not quite, but so near as to matter nothing." Monsieur Laverdet dropped his voice confidentially. "The wholesale people begin to be surly—little indications of suspicion. The restaurant is in a bad position. People ignore it."

"Come, come—what about me? I frequent it to the extent of owing you four pounds."

Laverdet put the interruption aside with an eloquent gesture.

"Ah! If the street along there could only be closed more people would see L'Escargot d'Or—more people would come in. Regard it, *mon ami,* there is a science of streets. Why do people use one side of a street more than another?"

"I'm no good at conundrums. What's the answer?"

"Why are all the great *magasins* on the east side of Regent Street and the north side of Oxford Street more than on the other sides?"

"It is because——?" suggested Percival and waited.

"You can search me," said Laverdet, shrugging his shoulders. "I do not know—it is what you call the bloomin' mystery!"

"If I indulged in the vernacular," murmured Percival softly. "Well," he went on airily, "obviously we can not bung up Barbour Street for the benefit of L'Escargot d'Or. What you want is a thumping boost—advertisement."

"Advertisements cost money," grunted Laverdet. "Why, I can not afford even to keep Alphonse—he goes. After that I do the waiting myself."

Percival Pemblebury leaned back in his chair and shot out his legs. He rattled his keys in his trousers pocket, while Laverdet savagely dabbed his cigarette in the ash-tray. The cat, Athanasius, joined the conclave. But his wisdom, if dignified, was scarcely helpful. It took the form of profound silence. At last Percival spoke.

"Nothing is gained in crises like these by panic," he declared, stroking the cat. "We have here a situation that demands clear, cool, decisive thinking by a trained and powerful mind. Do you get me, Laverdet?"

"At least I do not get my four pounds."

"Mercenary man! Can't you forget for one moment your miserable pelf? As a matter of fact, the bill to-day comes to three and twopence. That is to say—if we wish to be exact—that I owe you

three pounds nineteen and sixpence ha'penny. But never mind that," said Percival. "It is included in the situation I am about to rehearse. The restaurant is in a parlous state?"

"Hein?"

"In other words, the tide in th' affairs of L'Escargot d'Or is at low ebb?"

"I have said so—do not scrub it in."

"If you interpolate your piffling remarks, *cher* Archambaud, we shall arrive nowhere. Let us be brief and pithy. I owe you four pounds——"

"You do," Laverdet agreed heartily.

"The emphasis is quite unnecessary. I merely made what is called a rhetorical pause. L'Escargot d'Or needs boosting. It demands that a cool, clear, decisive brain should take a hand—pardon the confused figure—a hand in its affairs. That is where I come in."

"Yes?"

"Yes. The first thing to do is to pay off my debt to you. If at the same time I can arrange funds for the boosting campaign so much the better. At present I do not see my way clear about the boodle —but that is mere detail. The plan is the thing."

"If you pay the bill I believe you," grunted Laverdet.

"Can't you stop harping on your blessed bill, you usurer? Let me see. This is Monday. Alphonse goes on Saturday probably——"

"No, a week on Wednesday he finish'," corrected Laverdet.

"So much the better. That gives me some extra days. The real campaign starts on Wednesday week when I assume the place and dignity of Alphonse."

"I am too sad to laugh at your jokes, Monsieur Pemblebury."

"At the turning-point of your career as a professional host you show an appalling density, my good friend. I am not joking. By taking the place of Alphonse I give the restaurant the needful boost. 'Celebrated Artist turns Waiter!'—headlines in the Press—'From Paint-rag to Table-napkin!' Don't you see, my friend?"

"I see with pity a man make a great donkey of himself," said Laverdet sourly. "Regard it well, monsieur. A waiter is not made by putting the Harry, Dick, or Tom into a dress-coat. It is not a matter of spreading paint on canvas, this. It is a serious business."

"I appreciate the fact—and I wish to be taken seriously. But we trifle time. Much has to be accomplished in a mere week. *Attention-là! Garde à vous!* The campaign starts from this moment. Remember the great Napoleon!"

"Hein?" Laverdet was infected in spite of himself.

" 'The eyes of Europe are upon you!' Victory

is, if not in sight, at least *là-bas*. I go to collect the boodle!"

Alphonse, sucking his pencil meditatively, appeared at Pemblebury's elbow with the usual slip.

"*L'addition, monsieur,*" he said.

Pemblebury rose and took his coat from Alphonse who put the bill between his lips so that his hands would be free. Percival briskly assumed his hat, grasped his gloves and cane. He put his finger under the bill, still suspended from the lips of the waiter, and he flicked the paper engagingly.

"That, my dear Alphonse," said he, "you may file with its older little brothers—a goodly family. And stay! Here is a ha'penny for you—the last of the Mohicans. Monsieur Laverdet will make it up to sixpence—he owes me fivepence ha'penny—change from four pounds!"

Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet gazed open-mouthed after the artist's retreating figure. He was very thoughtful.

"It is not impossible," he murmured half to himself. "That parishioner has at least a genius for finance!"

PASSENGERS

CLOSELY curtained litter from coastwise Dubræ,
  Swaying thro' Londinium where the dust clouds whirl,
With a cargo of petulance, the proconsul's concubine,
  A jaguar, a monkey, and a cowed slave-girl.

High-swung chariot coming up from Whitehall,
  Jolting through the cart-ruts and the clay-stained snow,
With a cargo of megrims, Madame the Countess,
  Furbelows, Mechlin, and her new cicisbeo.

County Council tramcar with its breath-dimmed windows,
  Groping through the fog to the muffled clang of bells,
With a cargo of weariness, a bun-fed typist,
  Orange-peel, fag-ends, and dank, sour smells.

MAUGAN JAYSFIELD

From "The Parodies of Percival"

CHAPTER II

IN SEVEN VERSES

All poets delight in combats.
G. B. S.

I

THE art editor of that up-to-date humorous journal *The Faun* did a very unprofessional thing. He giggled.

"It's dam' funny, Percival," he admitted, and he peered at the drawing once again. "Yes, by George! I'll make a full-page of this. Why don't you do more black and white, Percy?" he demanded. "We can't keep you going with color stuff."

Percival ignored the question.

"I want the boodle for it right now," he said pointedly.

The art editor frowned.

"I'll put a check through for it on Friday," said he.

"I'm afraid you do not grasp my meaning, my dear Peter," Percival replied. "When I said 'right

now' I meant at this very moment. I can't wait until Friday. The dog will be sold by then."

"The dog? What dog?"

"Any dog. In this case a purely hypothetical dog. I can't go into all the details of why I want the money right now, so for the sake of brevity I say I want to buy a dog. And why not?"

The art editor blinked in an effort to follow the argument. He pulled himself together with a jerk.

"Look here, Percival," he said persuasively. "The old man has the strongest objection to midweek payments——"

"But this is only Monday, my dear Peter."

"It's the same thing. The old man thinks it stretching a point to put a check through before publication even with the weekly accounts, and if I were to send round to the cashier for a check now there would be the devil to pay."

"You don't send round to the cashier for a check, most excellent Peter," said Percival softly, but distinctly. "You send round to him for seven crisp new Fishers and seven bright new shillings."

"It can't be done——"

"Well, in that case I'd better take the drawing round to *London To-day* and see Billy Stokes——"

"Ah," said the art editor suddenly, "that reminds me! Look here, Percival. I'll stretch the point if you'll do me a favor."

"Surely," said Percival. "What is it?"

The art editor picked up a print from the far end of his desk and threw it down in front of Percival.

"I want you to do a piece of poetry in quick time for this double-spread," he explained. "Billy Stokes was to have done it, but we've left it too late, and he won't work in a hurry. Will you do it?"

Percival examined the print with interest. The scene represented was Eastern in character. A half-naked woman, beautiful of figure and divinely graceful, danced in a circle of light that filled the foreground. In the shadow behind her a man sat on a pile of rugs and cushions and watched her. The background was the star-besprinkled blue sky of a Persian night, against which loomed the dark masses of cypress and deodar.

"By Jove!" said Percival. "This fellow Beauregard is a nailer! It's slick!"

"Cost us a tidy penny," grumbled the journalist. "Will you do the poetry?"

"I don't know about poetry," said Percival, "but I dare say I can manage a set of verses."

"Where's the difference?" said the art editor. "Poetry or verse—whatever you like to call it—will you do it? That's the point, Percival."

"Sure I'll do it. How much do you want?"

"Here's the make-up. You've got to fill this space."

"One, two, three, four, five," Percival counted, "say ten verses of four lines each?"

"Wait a bit," the art editor interrupted. "We want an ornament between each verse and a good heading. That should leave room enough for seven verses in a fairly bold type."

"Oh, blow!" exclaimed Percival. "I wanted to do an abbreviated pantoum. What about a kyrielle?"

"What's a kyrielle?" the art editor asked suspiciously. "We don't want any highbrow business in this, Percy. All we want is a bit of poetry explaining the picture."

Just then the editor himself strolled into the office.

"Hullo, Pemblebury," he said. "What are you doing here?"

The art editor made answer.

"Pemblebury brought in a drawing——"

"Let me see it," said the autocrat. "H'm!" he remarked, having scanned the drawing, with a sour smile. "It'll do. Make a full-page of it."

"I've promised Percival the money for it straight away," the art editor explained, "on condition that he does a set of verses for the Beauregard double-spread."

"Dammit!" exclaimed his chief. "Hasn't that thing been done yet? It ought to have been done weeks ago!"

"Look here, old man," the art editor protested, "the plates are just this minute back from the process. I wanted you to let Billy Stokes have a look at the drawing before the blocks were made, but you bunged it over to process without heeding my advice. Percival will easily do the stuff by to-morrow," he added quickly, as he noted the rising choler of his chief. "Won't you, Percy?"

"To-morrow!" Percival was aghast. "Why don't you say by to-night?" he asked sarcastically.

"By to-night would be better," the art editor admitted in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Heaven knows I am no versifier," said Percival piously, "but I do like time to do myself credit. Last time you came to me in the same hurry, but I wrote you a dandy little rondeau. And what did you do? *You cut out four lines.*"

"Well, why not?" the editor demanded snappily. "You poetical fellows seem to think your verses are sacrosanct——"

"I'm not thinking of the sacredness of my muse at all," said Percival with a smile; "I'm thinking of the reputation of *The Faun.*"

"How's that? What's the matter with *The Faun?*"

"When you take a set of verses like the rondeau, and label it as such, you've got to stick to the form whatever happens. You can't cut lines from a

rondeau—and leave it a rondeau. It immediately becomes something else. The same rule, my good people, applies to the ballade, the rondel, the triolet, the sestina, or the——"

"I wish you'd talk sense," the editor said crossly. "Who cares whether your darned poetry is a rondo, or a rondel, or a what-ye-may-call-um? What poetry wants is punch—zipp!—swing! Like Kipling's."

"Oh, you've found out about *him,* have you?" Percival smiled.

"You won't deny that Kipling can write good stuff, will you?"

"Not at all. The point I want to make is that you severely truncated, not to say lacerated, my rondeau —but instead of altering the title you left it simply *Rondeau,* and advertised with customary zipp, swing and punch your lack of culture."

"We're out for culture all the time," the editor said with virtuous indignation. "Let me tell you that this is one of the highest-class—and smartest—journals in the country. It is to be found in the mansions of the——"

"Yes, yes, I know. See the posters on the Underground. Still, I'm glad you cut my name out of the thing."

"We had to cut five lines somewhere, Percival," the art editor said soothingly. "And rather than

cut any more of your poetry, Percival, we cut out your name. We know what you fellows are about your stuff."

Percival laughed outright.

"Oh, all right, all right," he said. "Then I may take it that seven verses is what you want for this thing of Beauregard. I mean, I may take it as definite—that you won't have to cut any—or ask for more?"

The art editor fell to measuring verses in an old file of the journal.

"Seven's the number, Percival," he announced. "I'll have a block made for the heading first thing to-morrow. What title will you give it?"

"How the devil should I know?" Percival demanded. "I've had the thing only four minutes, and they've been occupied in intellectual discussion."

"The trouble with you poetical fellers," said the editor, argumentatively following his own trend of thought, "is that you're out of touch with the business side of your job. I'm not talking of you as an artist, Percival——"

"Thank you very much."

"No. I mean about writing poetry. What's the good of coming into the office of a snappy, smart, modern journal like *The Faun* and talking poppycock about babbling brooks, and spring in the bough?"

"I dunno," said Percival. "What's the answer?"

"We want live, human stuff," said the editor doggedly, "stuff pulsing with life. Instead of mooning around in meadows and all that, you should be studying human nature, getting to grips with the hard facts of life. The trouble with fellers like you, Percival, is that you're only half alive. You're dreaming all the time. You write verses about women—like that rondo of yours—and what do you know about women? Every woman's a saint to you—when we know, we men of the world, that every woman has her price, and that those that are straight are straight only because they haven't found a safe way of going off the track. Isn't that so, Peter?" he asked his art editor.

"Of course," the art editor agreed dutifully.

"In this paper," the chief went on, "we want stuff with its clothes off. Bare, hard facts—smartly put, of course—but true to modern conditions. See things as they are, Pemblebury—not as you imagine them in that dreamy noodle of yours. Zipp! Fighting stuff! If not the rapier, then the bludgeon! Guts!"

"Oh, all right," said Percival. "If you want viscera I'll make the stuff as pot-bellied as you like. Oh, yes. You'll have it beautifully abdominal, I promise you."

"Now, don't do anything silly, Percival," the ed-

itor of the humorous journal said seriously. "Make a good job of it. What's your idea?"

"I dunno," said Percival. "I can't tell until I sit down to it—oh, Lord!" he broke off. "And I have a ticket for the fight to-night."

"Have you?" the two newspaper men said simultaneously. "Who do you think will win?"

"Charron, of course. The Englishman is tough, but he isn't in the same street as Charron."

"But think of the terrible trouncing Charron got from Clancy," the editor insisted. "They say it has broken his nerve."

Percival smiled. "I'll take five to two that Charron has his man out in the fourth round," he said.

"I'll bet you!" the editor quickly exclaimed.

"So will I," his subordinate followed.

"Righto! You lay five to two that Charron doesn't knock Housemen out before the finish of the fourth round."

They noted the bets, and when the editor had written a chit on the cashier for seven guineas, payment for the accepted full-page, Percival departed, carrying the proof of the double-spread as an aid to inspiration.

II

The clock in the counting-house showed half-past four when, with a neat bundle of notes crisping in

his pocket, Percival set out for home. The fight was timed to start at nine-thirty, which gave him five hours to spare. He decided to walk round by the Park and think out the verses in transit.

(What would the woman's name be—the woman in the sketch?) He decided it might be Zuleika. (Zuleika somehow was right—good title—*Kyrielle of Zuleika*—splendid!)

KYRIELLE OF ZULEIKA

Under the Canopy of Night
I steal away from the Palace bright——

(Yes. Girl has a lover somewhere—that's it. Oh, yes. She is in a harem or something—what do they call 'em?—anderoon—yes, good word that. Use it somewhere. Has a young lover, but married to an old man—Sardar—ancient blighter! Good!)

The Sardar is old and very cruel——

("Old and very cruel" is right.)

He feeds himself on broth and gruel!

(Shut up! Cruel—jewel—gruel—newel—old—cold—cold—ah!)

The Sardar is cruel and very old;
In his ancient veins the blood is cold.
I steal away from his Palace bright
Under the Canopy of Night.

He paused to scribble the result of his imagining on the back of the reproduction. He altered as he wrote.

> The Sardar is cruel and very old;
> In his ancient veins the blood runs cold.
> I steal away—though I dread his might—
> Under the Canopy of Night.
>
> I steal away by the Palace walk
> Where deodar and cypress talk——

(Not nearly shivery enough!)

> Where waving cypress and ilex talk.

(Wonder if they have ilex in Persia? Doesn't matter. Does "talk" give the impression of rustling? Don't care! Pity to drop the deodar, though.)

> I steal away by the Palace walk
> Where waving cypress and ilex talk.
> I steal away from the Palace bright
> Under the Canopy of Night.

Percival wandered on through the Park, stopping every now and then to search the sky for the apt word. He was roused from his musing by a resounding thwack on the back.

"Hullo, Percy!" a voice yelled in his ear.

"You go to hell!" said the versifier, wriggling

his stinging scapula; "if you do that again, Buster, I'll dot you one in the eye!"

"Don't be sore, Percy," pleaded the boisterous one. "Going to the fight to-night?"

"I am. Are you?"

"No. The Frenchman's a wash-out since his drubbing from Clancy. Houseman will eat him."

"What'll you lay me Charron doesn't knock him out by the fourth round?"

"I wouldn't take your money, Percival. What do you know about glove-fighting, anyhow?"

Yet somehow Percival booked a bet of five to one against his fancy. When that was accomplished he turned on his heel and left the boisterous one gaping.

"Loony! Quite mad!" mused the boisterous one. "Writing poetry! It's a shame to take his money."

With that contrariness of things which sometimes happens the Park was littered with Percival's acquaintances. He wanted to write verse but found himself writing down a record of bets. By the time he reached home for dinner he stood to lose fifteen pounds if Charron did not knock out his man by the fourth round and to win about forty if he did.

The gigantic stadium was packed almost to suffocation when Percival got there, and it was a matter of some difficulty for him to reach his seat. His stall had been reserved, but when he came upon the row and number indicated on his ticket he found

the space occupied by a bulky individual in evening clothes.

"Pardon me," said Percival mildly, "I'm afraid you're in my seat, sir."

"Well, what about it?" asked the bulky gentleman.

"I'm afraid you'll have to come out of it," said Percival.

"What if I don't come out of it?"

"In that case," said Percival mildly, "I shall be reluctantly compelled to exert some pressure in removing you."

"You'll what?"

"To relapse into the vernacular, I'll dam' well pull you out of it, you big stiff!" said Percival with careful heat.

"Oh, will you?" asked the big man sarcastically. "Go away, kid. I'm Dan Figgis, ex-champion of England." As if that settled the question.

"I don't care if you're Daniel the prophet, and have all your performing lions with you," Percival said with conviction. "I'm Percival Pemblebury, not unknown to fame as an artist, and I have a set of verses to write by to-morrow morning. I want to have them done before the real bout comes on—and I want my seat. If you don't come out I promise you faithfully I'll yank you out!"

"Verses, b'chee! Poetry!" breathed the ex-

champion. "Here, Bill," he said to his neighbor, "you take my ticket and go to my seat. This kid's in earnest!"

"Aw, Dan——!" protested he called Bill, but at a slight move from the big man, he rose hurriedly and went his way.

Percival took his rightful position and produced his notebook. His large neighbor forgot the ring, in which two middle-weights cuddled each other through a slow-footed series of rounds, and gazed open-mouthed at the versifier.

Percival wrote without hesitation:

> My Love is straight and young and kind,
> And joy in his circling arms I find.
> He finds me lovely in his sight
> Under the Canopy of Night.

"Well, I'm blowed!" said Mr. Figgis. "Fancy comin' to a glove fight to write poetry! Say, kid—you're a wonder to me!"

"Not at all, Mr. Figgis," Percival replied. "I say, look at the love-birds in the ring. (Break! Now, hit him! Fight him, boy! Hit—ah-h-h! Gr-r-r-r! Fancy missing that opening!) I wanted to see the fight—and I must write these verses by to-morrow morning. Might as well occupy the time as not."

"I thought poets was all skinny and that," Mr.

Figgis reflected; "Jessies, namby-pamby, mother's boy sort of thing. Why, you're just a sizable or'nary kid with his hair cut!"

"Pardon me one moment, Mr. Figgis," said Percival, "and I'll take up this interesting conversation again." He began to write:

> I thank the Gods who gave to me
> A skin as white as ivory——

"Hit him, you muff! Jump to it! No, don't do that—don't kiss him—hit him! Break!"

> That I may give my Love delight
> Under the Canopy of Night.

"What was it you said, Mr. Figgis?—something about having one's hair cut?"

"I said you was just an or'nary kid—no long hair or that," the boxer explained.

"That idea of the poet or the artist is just as old-fashioned as the notion that every prize-fighter has a broken nose and a cauliflower ear," said Percival.

"Live and learn," Mr. Figgis remarked in a gratified tone. "You said an earful there, kid. Why shouldn't the fightin' man be a gent?"

"Why not, indeed?" said Percival.

Below them the gong rang on a no-decision bout, and the ring was cleared for the event of the eve-

ning. Attendants in clean white-drill suits and frowsy linen went about the auditorium diffusing pungent disinfectant from large sprayers in an endeavor to purify the air. Voices began to be heard offering bets on the result of the fight to come. Percival put up his notebook, for the demeanor of the audience and the preliminaries were almost as much to him as the fight itself.

The British challenger of the European champion was first through the ropes, and it was obvious that he was very nervous. After a space the Frenchman stepped nonchalantly into the ring, and answered the plaudits with his well-known gesture of greeting. Then, with a broad grin on his engaging countenance, he sauntered over to his opponent and shook him warmly by the hand. It was as if he welcomed him to a cosy dinner *à deux*.

In the first round it seemed that there was justification for the popular belief that Charron's defeat at the hands of Clancy had broken his spirit. He appeared to have lost that wonderful quickness which once was his. True, there were flashes now and then of the old brilliance, but the round finished with honors about equal.

In the second round the champion took a blow to the face from his challenger which brought the supporters of the latter to their feet in wild excitement. But Houseman did not follow up the advan-

tage quickly enough. The champion seemed to be conserving his energy in unwonted fashion.

Percival watched the contest with keen appreciation, but the back of his mind was engaged in verse construction. Mentally he evolved another verse.

The pace of the fight was quicker in the third round. Charron now boxed his man with great skill, and landed more blows—and more effective blows—than his opponent did. Yet the British pugilist fought with a certain doggedness that kept heart in his supporters.

"All over but the shouting," said Percival to his neighbor when the round ended. "Charron is playing with him."

"I dunno," Figgis replied. "The big fellow's got plenty of game in him. He may beat the dude fighter yet."

"I'll take five to one Charron gives him the K.O. next round," Percival offered.

"I wouldn't take your money, kid," said the old fighter.

"Don't mind that. Shall we say pounds?"

"I'll go you then."

The gong sounded, and it immediately became apparent that the fight had really started. The Frenchman now fought at a dazzling pace, and bewildered his opponent with a myriad of punches. Houseman covered most of the first two minutes

but toward the close of the round led for what seemed a splendid opening. The Frenchman stepped back a pace and the Englishman, following him, walked into a beautifully timed straight right to the point. As the blow landed the Frenchman's hand turned from pronation into supination in a telling twist. His opponent reeled forward. Then the champion landed another blow which will live in the history of fisticuffs. Recovering his right with lightning rapidity he as quickly shot it home again to the jaw in a tearing hook, before the beaten man had touched the floor. The first blow might have been sufficient, but the second was conclusive. The count was over when the bell rang.

"Beautiful! Lovely!" breathed Percival. "Nobody but Charron could have done that. Mr. Figgis, I'll trouble you for a fiver!"

The prize-fighter rose in a sort of stupor, and searched for his pocketbook.

"B-chee, kid, you were right!" he said. "The dude fighter was playin' with him. Here you are—your fiver. Like to come round and see the boys?"

"Rather!" said Percival, and pocketed the note.

III

It was in the small hours of the morning when Percival Pemblebury walked toward Soho. His

brain was full of the fight, and mentally he went over all its phases. He fought Charron, and he fought Houseman, beating them both—mentally. At the same time he was occupied with his verses and discovered a successful line or two.

Ordinarily the walk of Percival Pemblebury was of a romantic, slightly swaggering, quality. But to-night, after admiring the cat-like grace of the champion, his walk was panther-like, almost stealthy. He walked on the ball of his foot, and made no noise. He was studiedly graceful. His poise was so alert that any alarm would be met by a dazzlingly rapid side-step. Oh, yes. Charron had, as the phrase goes, nothing on Percival in the matter of footwork!

Noiselessly, then, Percival turned into a big crescent of gloomy Victorian houses, each with its heavy stone portico abutting on the footway. A blaze of light came from a doorway along the crescent, and it shone upon a group of people who struggled on the pavement. Percival approached the conflict with a trifle of reserve, until he came close enough to see the composition of the group, when it became clear that two men in evening clothes were trying to force a woman into the lighted doorway. Percival leaped forward. The woman—and Percival had time to mark that she was beautiful and young—was making great play with a suitcase she was

carrying, otherwise she would have been forced up the stairs before Percival's arrival on the field of action.

"Hullo!" said Percival, sternly officious. "What's all this?"

"Help me!" the beautiful girl ejaculated.

"Right!" said Percival. He made a spring at the back of the bigger of the two men, and landed with his hands on the man's collar and his knee on his spine. The big man reeled backward and came sprawling to the pavement. In surprise at this event the other assailant of the girl let her go, but not soon enough to be prepared for the lightning attack Percival launched at him. Percival's left fist landed on his larynx, and as the head went up in gasping agony, Percival's right swung home to that "funny-bone" on the chin which is so vulnerable.

"Pick up your case and run to the end of the crescent," Percival cried to the girl. "Wait for me there!"

The girl was quick-witted, and obeyed at once. Percival turned from the man to whom he had administered the K.O. and faced the bigger fellow, who was now sailing at him with whirling fists.

"You're much too open, *mon gars,*" said the poetaster, and went neatly under the flailing fists to plug his man in the wind. This doubled the man forward to a left uppercut, which in turn knocked

his head up again to receive a swung right landed by Percival after dodging a clinch. Roaring now, the big fellow turned and slashed out a vicious left. Percival stepped back a space and slapped the whizzing fist smartly with the butt of his left palm, throwing the man off his balance and leaving him completely open. Charron himself could not have been quicker, thought Percival, as he smashed a resounding right swing to the beefy jaw. The big man toppled with a groan over his prostrate fellow. At that moment a manservant in a striped waistcoat and sundry other oddments of livery came running down the steps of the house.

"The compliments of Mr. Percival Pemblebury, the well-known poetaster and artist, to the two white-slave traffickers on the pavement," said Percival breathlessly, "but he has pinched the girl and will be pleased to let either of them have a little more of the same medicine any time they want it."

Then, as the servant made for him with extended arms, Percival, with an elbow-hold and a hank, dropped him neatly on top of his master.

The girl was waiting for Percival in one of the porticos farther along the crescent.

"Come along," Percival gasped. "Give me your case. We'll act first and you can explain afterwards, if you've a mind to. Let's find a taxi."

As they sped out of the crescent they saw that the

servant was trying to lift both men at once, and that these were not eager to leave the solid support of the pavement. The two runaways hurried until they came to a well-lighted main thoroughfare.

"Take a breather," Percival ordered. "There's sure to be a taxi along in a minute or two. Meantime, perhaps, you'll tell me where you'd like to go?"

"I don't know where to go," the girl replied. "I have given up my room at my hotel, and I don't know any one in London that I'd like to knock up at this hour. What am I to do?"

"We'll make a plan when we're in a taxi," Percival decided. "The great thing is to get out of this vicinity, for I'm afraid I've damaged your friends."

"They aren't my friends!" the girl said vehemently. "They're beasts!"

At that moment a taxi came into hailing distance, and as it came up to the curb at Percival's signal the girl seemed suddenly to come to a resolution.

"Tell him to drive to Paddington station, please," she said.

"But you——" Percival began.

"I shall be all right," the girl said quickly. "Please don't think me rude if I don't explain just now. Perhaps one day I'll tell you—but not now. Oh, I'm awfully mean—but I so much want to know the name of my rescuer——"

"My name is Percival Pemblebury."

"Mine is Myrtle—Myrtle something. Oh, you don't think me mean, do you?"

"You are under no obligation to tell me more about yourself than you absolutely want to," said Percival. "I am content with 'Myrtle' until you find opportunity and inclination to elucidate the mystery. Good night, Myrtle!"

"Good night—Percival," the girl said with a smile. "Thank you a thousand times."

Percival shut the door of the cab.

"Paddington," he said to the driver.

He stood bareheaded on the pavement until the taxi turned out of sight at the next corner. There was a flutter of something white from its window, and with a sigh Percival resumed his walk to Soho.

IV

The editor of *The Faun* and his subordinate paid up their stakes and turned to Percival's verses.

"Kyrielle of Zuleika," the editor read aloud. "Um—ah. What's a k——? N'mind. It sounds all right.

"Kyrielle of Zuleika

"The Sardar is cruel and very old;
In his ancient veins the blood runs cold.
I steal away—though I dread his might—
Under the Canopy of Night.

"I steal away by the palace walk,
Where waving cypress and ilex talk,
I steal away from the palace bright
Under the Canopy of Night.

"My Love is straight and young and kind,
And joy in his circling arms I find.
He finds me lovely in his sight
Under the Canopy of Night.

"I thank the Gods who gave to me
This skin as smooth as ivory,
That I may give my Love delight
Under the Canopy of Night.

"I thank the Gods for woman's fears,
The gift of laughter and of tears,
That I may please my Love aright
Under the Canopy of Night.

"I thank the Gods for parting pain,
The joy to see my Love again,
For passion's depth and passion's height,
Under the Canopy of Night.

"When that day comes and my Love must flee
On our secret's swift discovery,
I pray the Gods for the bowstring tight
Under the Canopy of Night."

"Whew!" said the art editor. "That's a bit near—what?"

"I'm afraid, Pemblebury," said the editor gravely, "you'll have to tone it down a bit——"

"I'll see you further first," said Percival. "What on earth for?"

"Oh, well. Perhaps you're right," said the editor, after reflection. "*The Faun* can risk a little."

"The trouble with you poets," he went on after a pause, "is that you're never by any chance men of action, and so, when you try to get blood into your stuff, you only get lymph. It's morbid, do you see?"

"I see," said Percival meekly.

"The thing you ought to do, Percival," the editor insisted, "is to live your adventures—not dream them. Find out about women by experience—find out about life by experience. You'll only do smart, snappy stuff by being smart and snappy—quick in decision—taking risks. Do you see?"

"I see," said Percival meekly. "It's funny how you get down to the rock bottom of things, to the absolute tintacks, as it were. If there's one thing I admire above another in men it's that capacity for keen and trenchant analysis of human nature. But," he added, "I suppose that comes from being an editor—or rather, that's why you are an editor?"

The manipulator of the blue pencil looked at him keenly, but Percival's features were rapt with an expression of mild and placid inquiry.

"I suppose it is," said the editor modestly.

APHORISM

A PAINTER painted a picture, and many saw.
Those who loved the painter said, "How wonderful!"
Those who loved him not said, "H'm—well—yes?"
But it remains a question if even God knew
What the painter meant.

EVAN EDWINS

From "The Parodies of Percival"

CHAPTER III

A DAY IN THE COUNTRY

Art for Art's sake—and God help you!
Popular Phrase

I

MONSIEUR ARCHAMBAUD LAVERDET drained the last of his morning coffee, and gazed at his early visitor.

"I put it to you, my dear Archambaud," said Percival Pemblebury with forensic intensity; "how is money made?"

The proprietor of L'Escargot d'Or shrugged his shoulders wearily.

"I wish I knew, *mon ami,*" he said with more than a touch of despair.

Percival blew a very neat ring of tobacco smoke. Then he cleared his throat.

"Since our last interview," he went on as if he had expected the answer and considered it unimportant, "I have been turning my extraordinarily acute observation on the subject——"

"And?" asked Laverdet as one completely without hope.

"—and I have concluded that the way to make money is to have something to sell in the proper market."

"Easier said than done," grunted Laverdet.

"Not at all," Percival declared. "Your intelligence is clouded by the non-success of your entirely charming *cuisine*. I have not the time at this juncture"—Percival paused on the word as if he liked it, and repeated it lovingly—"at this juncture, I said."

"I heard you," said Laverdet testily.

"Good! I have not the time to explain why the Golden Snail is not the success it ought to be. That will come later. If we are to find money we must seek for something to sell and the proper place to sell it."

"Well?"

"Think round, my good friend. Of all the people you know, what is it each one is most likely to buy?"

"It depends," said Laverdet, interested in spite of himself. "There is Monsieur Robson. He is mos' interested in new pieces of mechanism to hang on his car. Then there is Monsieur Hoggenbaum, who made so much money in scrap steel during the War. He desires to be known as a man of culture. His special form of madness is Chinese furniture—of *laque*, preferably red."

The eyes of Percival narrowed suddenly. He held out a hand.

"Archambaud Laverdet," he said impressively, "there is no need to go farther. We have found the man who will supply the munitions of war."

"Comment? Dis donc!"

"Tell me, does Mr. Hoggenbaum come frequently to the restaurant?"

"Why, yes. He is always here on Thursdays and Fridays."

"The day after to-morrow! Too soon! You think he will be here on Friday?"

"I expect him, yes. But what——?"

"Does he come alone?"

"Invariably. But——"

"Let me see," said Percival, ignoring the intense curiosity exhibited by his friend. "There's seven guineas from that sketch—from which I deduct four pounds paid you. Three pounds seven. Five pounds from the ex-champion of England—a most engaging personality, my dear Archambaud, with whom I had a little bet. A rough diamond. You ought certainly to know Mr. Figgis——"

"I wish that you would not jump from one subject to another like that!" cried the bewildered Laverdet. "Are you going to sell diamonds, then?"

"Pardon me for a moment. That's eight pounds seven. Two fivers from the noblemen who conduct

The Faun—makes eighteen. Then there's Jenkins's five pounds——"

Percival continued his calculations, while Laverdet watched him open-mouthed.

"I make it forty-three pounds seventeen shillings," Percival said at last. "Now that's hardly enough to carry out the scheme. We need another fiver at least. I would ask you to let me have that four pounds back again as a loan—but I fear that you have grown to love it. No. We must do a MacIsaac——"

"Do a Mac—— What is he, this Mac—something?"

"It would take too long to explain," said Percival. "And time is precious. I must be in the heart of Surrey by eleven o'clock."

He rose and snatched his hat.

"See to it, Laverdet, that Mr. Hoggenbaum has a table for two. The other chair I shall occupy. Then watch Mr. Hoggenbaum disgorge the spondulicks."

"Disgorge the spon——" gasped Laverdet. He trotted after Percival to the door with dazed air and hands outstretched imploringly. Percival paused on the threshold. He put an impressive finger to his lips, and frowned meaningly. Laverdet had not the slightest idea what it all portended, but he too put a finger to his lips and frowned. Next moment the artist was striding up the Soho street.

Within twenty minutes of leaving the restaurant Percival had collected his outdoor painting kit and had strapped a couple of canvases together. Fifteen minutes later he was seated in the ten o'clock train from Waterloo and was on his way *via* Wimbledon to Horsley.

II

In front of Percival was a tumbledown, but inhabited, half-timbered cottage. A weedy pond, overhung by a drooping willow, occupied the near foreground, and a few brown and white fowls and a duck or two made bright spots of light as they pecked among the dust of the lane beside the cottage or gobbled among the weeds of the pond. The scene possessed just that kind of postcard effect that has been painted scores of times by unimaginative amateurs or ineffectual ladies—the kind of subject that is hackneyed enough to sell immediately.

The gentleman in the loudly checked cap—too small for his head—materialized almost as soon as Percival set up his easel. Percival had not marked his approach. It might readily have been that he had suddenly germinated from the soil, for no footsteps had heralded his arrival. One moment previously he had not been. Then suddenly he was.

A tall man of weedy growth, apparently weak at the knees, he was costumed in an abbreviated tail-coat of a dingy black, braided round the edges. The

waistcoat also was braided, and it once had been of a check nearly as loud as the cap. But time, and the application of some unguent that looked like cold mutton fat, while giving the garment an elegant glaze, had robbed it of its pristine hues. The same treatment seemed to have been given also to the sponge-bag trousers draping the inbent legs, so that in front the cloth had lost the minute plaid pattern that could just be discerned behind. Shapeless brown boots with cloth tops covered the large and gnarled feet, and a peaked paper collar with a made-up tie that once had been electric-blue finished off the remarkable get-up of the visitor. The face under the cap came to a point in two hardly broken lines from the neck and the top of the head. Behind the nose, which was large, shiny, and rather red of tint, two eyes set close together lurked cunningly in sketchy sockets, and under the nose there sprang out a straggling reddish-brown moustache that completely valanced the mouth and part of the retiring chin. We had almost forgotten the ears of the stranger. They were large, red, and protruding, reminding one of nothing so much as a pair of pork chops.

The stranger, however, was not apparently of a loquacious disposition. To Percival he vouchsafed no greeting, and save for stertorous breathing, punctuated by an occasional sniff, he was silent.

But, though silent, he managed to convey an attitude of mind.

It seemed to the artist that his audience regarded with a degree of impatience any preliminary in the way of seeking the best composition for the picture. The attitude implied was that Percival should cut out the shifting-about business and settle down to the real job of covering canvas.

Having set up his easel Percival opened a little folding stool on which he carefully set his open paint-box with the palette exposed. It was his habit to stand while working but not to hold his palette in his hand.

The gentleman at his elbow breathed even more heavily as the subject was blocked in with deft smears of light red. So great was his interest in the process that he almost rested his chin on Percival's shoulder. In stepping back to have a better view of the composition Percival accidentally trod heavily on the toes of his audience.

"I beg your pardon," said Percival politely. "Sorry!"

"Granted!" said the gentleman, as one more hurt than grieved.

"Eh?" asked Percival.

"Granted!" repeated he of the adenoids shortly. Here polite conversation ended. Artist and onlooker plunged again into silence.

The silent onlooker had the manner of a profound critic. He stepped back very frequently as the picture took shape, and he canted his head on those occasions until he must almost have seen the canvas upside down. He looked so annoyed with Percival for standing in front of the canvas and thus obscuring the view that the artist was not surprised to find himself gently but firmly pushed aside before one of the steppings-back. This was done so much as a right, and in such unconcerned silence, that Percival accepted it with equal quiet. After that the move became automatic. When Percival heard the breathing recede he mechanically stood aside.

The critic on one occasion, while stepping backward, canted so far over that he lost his balance, tripped over a tussock of grass and sat down violently in the dust of the road. The critic seemed grieved at the misplaced levity when Percival permitted himself a gentle smile. His silence was charged with forgiving pity as he calmly dusted himself down and reassumed his outrageous cap.

But the critic's next move revealed such greatness of mind that Percival's semi-humorous regard became tinged with almost reverence. The critic gently lifted the paint-box from the stool, sat down with the greatest *sang-froid,* and blandly condescended to hold box and palette on his knees.

Percival accepted the situation with the serenity

that comes only from the philosophic outlook. He broke the loquacious habit of a lifetime and said not a word. Even faced as he was with the prospect of seeing the shiny gentleman every time he filled a brush, Percival managed to forget him. He concentrated on his work.

When the lady with the *lorgnette* stopped to examine the picture the work was well advanced. She ignored Percival entirely until she had satisfied her curiosity over the painting.

"Do you do this for a living, my man?" she asked, in a consciously well-bred voice.

"Only sometimes, madam," Percival replied in his best manner, "but my real job is that of waiter."

"Ah, I see. You do this while on holiday. It is quite good—oh, *quite* good—for an amatyuer. And when do you begin work again?"

"I expect to take up a job on Monday."

"Well, I should stick to the waiting if I were you. You paint rather well, but the other is surer."

"I quite agree with you, madam. As the ancients have it, *Ne sutor supra crepidam*—let the waiter only wait."

"Ah, quite so—quite so," murmured the lady hurriedly. "Er—I—er——"

"To err is human, madam," said Percival gently. "I have enough divinity to eke out the proverb. Goo-ood morning!"

The large and bewildered lady murmured something unintelligible and moved off. Percival turned to find his friend of the gay cap smiling fatuously. Percival bestowed on him a wink. The gentleman returned the salutation. He even took off his headgear to do it properly. But he never spoke a word.

The hurrying footsteps of the large lady had hardly died away when an old gentleman of fierce, military appearance turned up.

"Ah!" said he, and struck savagely at the ground with the ferrule of a thick bamboo cane. "An artist!"

"Wonderful perspicuity on the part of the military," Percival murmured. He turned to the fierce old gentleman. "Colonel S. Holmes, I presume?"

"Colonel be damned!" said the old warrior roundly.

"Very glad to see you, Colonel Bedamned," said Percival breezily, and flicked a high-light just where it was wanted.

"Colonel Bedamned be damned!" mouthed the enraged old soldier. "I'm General Sir Blunto Blunderstone, I'll have you know."

"Not *the* Sir Blunto Blunderstone?" Percival murmured incredulously, pausing on a brush-stroke.

The old gentleman softened a trifle. "There's only one Blunto Blunderstone, sir, and I'm him," he said with a terse disregard for grammar.

"Ah!" Percival said very wisely. He did not know Sir Blunto from Adam, but the old man had a curried appearance, and he hazarded a guess.

"We've heard of your doings, Sir Blunto—Indian Frontier, wasn't it?"

"Yes. The Kahootchi Pass was my job. I sacked the Secundra under old Napthali Khan and drove them from Kahootchi to Mazawattee. Old Napthali capitulated, sir, capitulated, after a tidy brush round the environs, sir, the environs of Damthirsti! Here, gimme hold of that brush and I'll show you——"

"If I might suggest, Sir Blunto," said Percival gently, "your rattan—rattan is the word, I think?—your rattan might possibly be better. You then would not need to stoop—I take it you mean to demonstrate the campaign on the dust. Stooping involves a certain discomfort to gentlemen of your habit."

"Quite right, young feller, it does. You ought to have been a Sapper. Well, as I was saying, here is the Kahootchi Pass——"

The old soldier busied himself with scrabblings in the loose dust, while Percival gave him as much attention as he could spare from his canvas. He murmured "Yes?" or "I see" whenever he felt it would be helpful.

Apparently he was successful.

"You're a clever young feller," said the satisfied

old man, when he had drawn a last triumphant stroke in the dust. "There are soldiers who can't grasp that campaign as quickly as you do. Now, I'll tell you what it is. As soon as you finish your sketch come along to my bungalow and have a bite to eat—just a tiffin, just a tiffin, you know. You'll find it at the top of the hill—The Towers is the name."

"Thank you very much, General. I shall be delighted."

The old soldier paused a trifle nervously.

"I don't know about your assistant," he stammered.

"My assistant?" said Percival with a touch of bewilderment.

The general indicated the gentleman of the raucous cap.

"Oh, him!" said Percival. "Bimms is all right—he only assists me on odd occasions. I fancy he lives in the district. He'll do splendidly on his own."

"Then that's all right," said the general. "Quarter to one, then—at The Towers." And he strode off.

Percival turned to the gentleman whom he had dubbed "Bimms" and found that worthy with his cap off. Again Percival winked at him. Mr. Bimms apparently had been expecting this, for he returned the salute at once and put on his strident headgear —still without a word.

When Percival made up his mind to paint the cottage he had imagined that he had secured a quiet lane. But the number of people who seemed to take him for a heaven-sent free show soon indicated that his imaginings had been vain. In the matter of little girls and boys Mr. Bimms proved his value. He allowed them what he considered a fair "look-see," then waved them away.

But the gentleman with the barrow-load of manure was of stronger mettle than the children. Neither he nor his barrow could be so easily got rid of. He wheeled his odoriferous vehicle close to the easel and sat nonchalantly on its handle and chewed a wisp of straw.

"Do this for an 'obby?" he asked at last.

"If you like to put it that way," said Percival, "yes."

"It's a good 'nuff 'obby for them as likes it, I dare say," said the interlocutor. He sighed freely as he rose and grasped the handles of his barrow. He paused and looked at the canvas disdainfully. Then he spat.

"My 'obby's keepin' rabbits," he said. "There's sense in that."

A regular succession of onlookers followed the rabbit-keeper. One chatty fellow came up and insisted on telling Percival stories of artists he had known and conveyed that his acquaintances of the

brush had usually been seedy and not the least bit moral. He seemed to have a distinct grievance against Percival for being so neat and well groomed.

The old woman whose cottage Percival was painting came out and hinted that her window-boxes would be the better for a touch up.

But all went their ways ultimately and left "Mr. Bimms" firm in his self-imposed task. Percival and he were alone when the stayer rose and carefully placed the box on the stool. He examined the now almost finished picture. He spoke.

"I'm havin' pork chops for my dinner," he said, "an' I'm goin' 'ome to them. Bit of luck for you, eatin' with the ole toff." He shuffled a trifle uneasily, and Percival sensed that a question impended.

"Well?" the artist encouraged.

"Bimms is a huncommon name?" hazarded he of the cap that must have survived from Joseph's coat.

"I should think it was," Percival admitted.

"Well, I wouldn't make so free with it, Mr. Hartist, if I was you."

The long and shiny gentleman turned on his heel but spoke once more over his shoulder.

"It 'appens," he said with devastating inconsequence, "that my name is 'Arris!"

III

"As an artist," said General Sir Blunto Blunderstone to Percival Pemblebury, as they sat over their

luncheon, "as an artist, young feller, you ought to be interested in my collection of miniatures."

"You collect miniatures, Sir Blunto?" Percival returned dreamily—the general's Burgundy was extraordinarily potent. "Splendid! I should like very much to see them."

"So you shall, my lad—so you shall."

And the general was as good as his word. He led the artist into the hall and to a series of glass-toppled cases. He produced keys at the end of a long chain and began to open the cases. Percival knew only a little about miniatures, but he eked out his knowledge by an understanding of technique. He was quite fluent.

"I can give a fairly good show of seventeenth-century stuff," said the general. "Here is one certainly by Flatman. This too might be by him, but some people believe it's a Beale. The later stuff is not so good. I have a Crosse or so, but I'd give the lot for a good 'un by Cosway."

"Not seriously?" asked Percival, his mind suddenly very alert.

"Well, I'd give a good sum for one I could be sure of."

"Look here, Sir Blunto. I believe I can put my hand on a miniature which is either Cosway or his pupil, Andrew Plimer. I didn't examine it closely, but I know the painting is excellent."

"Young feller me lad," said the general excitedly, "if you can bring me a miniature like that I'll buy it like a shot. And, what's more, I'll buy one of your pictures as well."

Percival Pemblebury hit town that afternoon in a state of excitement—or as near excitement as his natural phlegm would allow. If he was right in the conjecture that he had suggested to General Blunderstone he saw the money for boosting L'Escargot d'Or amply provided. He carried the wet canvas, as it was, through some dingy streets, and stepped lightly into the premises of one MacIsaac, dealer in pictures, lender of money on *objets d'art,* jewelery, fine linen and articles of domestic utility or personal adornment generally. Mr. MacIsaac ran a side-line in buying pictures for makers of Christmas cards and calendars.

"My dear Mr. Pemblebury," said MacIsaac, using his favorite gambit when the picture was produced, "this is very little use to me. It's a good picture, but it won't sell easily. I can't afford to lay out money on a picture that don't sell itself. Small profits and quick returns is my motto."

"All of which, MacIsaac," yawned Percival, "I have heard before. In the words of the poet, fork out the boodle and cut the sob stuff."

"Shakespeare, isn't it?" asked MacIsaac ingratiatingly. "The thing I like about you is the way you

know poetry. If I could find the time to read poetry I might make neat conversation too. Well, what about three pounds ten for the picture?"

"Not a denarius less than the usual fiver."

"What's a denarius?" anxiously inquired the dealer. "I change money, but I've never run across that coin."

"The denarius, my dear MacIsaac, is nothing less or more than the humble brown, the nimble copper, twelve of which go to the bob or shilling—in short, it is the *d* of your family motto, or, in other words, the penny."

"Fancy that, now. Here have I been writing *d* for a penny all my life and never knew that before—well, say four pounds for the picture?"

"As a matter of fact," said Percival easily, "I had resolved to be strictly professional and demand five guineas——"

"Five guineas!" MacIsaac gasped. "Why, that's five bob over five pound!"

"Exactly. The information I have given you regarding the penny is worth it—think of the way you can drag it into your conversation. Here am I instilling knowledge into your young brain, free, gratis and for nothing, and you try to make a huckster of me. I don't mind being instructor to Scoto-Transjordanic youth, but I'm jiggered if I will be a huckster."

"Ha-ha! You are a comedian, Mr. Pemblebury," said MacIsaac uneasily. "Well, well, say four pound ten—though it's ruin to me."

"I have said five guineas!"

"Nobody ever tell me again artists ain't business men," moaned MacIsaac. "You're cruel hard; the picture won't sell for months. But, well, five pounds be it."

"Guineas!"

"You said five pounds at first!"

"And what about you? You said three pound ten at first."

"Yes, but I've gone up!"

"I don't see your kick—so have I."

"I mean, I was willing to meet you."

"Nonsense—I came to your shop."

"I mean," said MacIsaac bitterly, "to meet you about price."

"And a very halting performance too," Percival said cheerfully. "Besides, I've altered the rendezvous. Five guineas!"

Then MacIsaac fought tooth and nail, metaphorically over the extra five shillings. His limit for any sketch of the sort in question was five pounds. He saw visions—if he were to let go—of queues of artists demanding the extra five shillings, and every four running off with a sovereign of his profits. He wanted Percival's picture, and he saw in his

mind's eye, a regular strike among the artists if he did not get the canvas at his own price. He breathed freely, therefore, when he heard Percival propound a compromise.

"Look here, MacIsaac," Percival said, "there's a thing here I should like to have. Perhaps we could do a deal."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Pemblebury!" the dealer gasped eagerly. "I'm willing to meet you in any way. What is your fancy?"

Percival turned nonchalantly to a case.

"This miniature here," he said. "Since I was here last the face of the pretty lady has been haunting me—and I want her."

"Is the miniature any good?" the dealer asked craftily. "I often think there's something about it—and miniatures are in demand."

"I don't know whether it is good or not," said Percival carelessly. "The painting is none too bad—as far as I can see for the dirt that's on it—but I'm prepared to offer you a couple of guineas for it, just because I like the girl. Give it to me with three guineas and the picture is yours."

MacIsaac did a piece of quick thinking. He would have sold the miniature any day for a sovereign, but, he argued, if a hard-up artist would give two guineas for it what would a moneyed collector give? Still, plenty of people had passed it

over. He could sell Percival's picture for about seven pounds, and he had acquired the miniature as an unredeemed pledge, so he would be making about three pounds ten profit. Pemblebury was too careless to be out for business—still——

"I don't know that I can part with the miniature for two guineas, Mr. Pemblebury," MacIsaac said at last. "I've been thinking I ought to have some of the things I don't know about valued one of these days by experts."

"Oh, very well, then," said Percival, lifting his canvas with a kind smile. "I suppose there's nothing doing to-day. So long!"

"Stop a bit—stop a bit, Mr. Pemblebury! I'll put it this way: since you are an old business friend you can have it and two-ten for the picture."

"You're an old screw to make money out of a love affair—but call it a bargain," said Percival.

He sensed danger in further arguing, and he did not wish to jeopardize the boosting of the Golden Snail for the sake of a fight.

The dealer handed over the money and the miniature, and Percival pocketed both with equal nonchalance.

Percival made through Soho to his studio-attic, and there he examined his acquisition with a careful eye. He decided that he had made no mistake—the miniature was either an exceptional Andrew Plimer,

or else a very fair Cosway. He cleaned the little picture on a careful method of his own, and the masterly hand was more evident than ever.

It was still daylight, and Percival decided to waste no time. He still had in mind a transaction with Laverdet's customer, Mr. Hoggenbaum, and if he was to be ready for Friday—two mere days away—he would have to be smart. He carefully wrapped the miniature in tissue paper, after a last scrutiny.

"And now for the paintings of that other famous, but more modern, master—Percival Pemblebury," he murmured.

He selected four of his best sketches, knowing that Sir Blunto's hobby would make him chary of paying heavily for more finished work, and walked across Shaftesbury Avenue to the telephone exchange. To his unwonted impatience the twenty minutes occupied in getting connection with The Towers seemed to be several hours. Evening was approaching rapidly, and he wanted to be in Surrey before daylight was gone. But at last he was speaking to Sir Blunto Blunderstone, and that stout warrior was excitedly delighted.

"Buy a toothbrush on your way to the station, Pemblebury," he yelled into the phone, "and come at once. Take the next train and bring the miniature with you. Yes. Bring some of your sketches, but don't for heaven's sake leave the miniature behind!"

"That's rather a nasty one for the modern master," grinned Percival, as he hung up the receiver. "But I suppose it is all in the game."

When Percival drove up to The Towers in the car that had been sent to the station to meet him Sir Blunto Blunderstone was standing on the steps of the house with a magnifying-glass in his hand. The general waved the glass as the car drew up.

"Lemme see it, Pemblebury, lemme see it!" he gasped. "Here, Smith, take Mr. Pemblebury's parcel. Lemme see the little gem!"

Percival unwrapped the miniature from its layers of tissue and held it out for inspection. The general pored over it with his glass.

"Oh, it must be," he whispered, with red creeping into his neck—"it can't *not* be—I'm sure it is—a Richard Cosway!"

"I'm glad you like it, sir," murmured Percival.

"Like it, you booby!" chuckled the general. "I love it—I simply can't live without it! And if any damned fool of an expert says it isn't by Richard Cosway I'll cut his throat—no, I won't; I'll pepper him with sparrow hail or buckshot, then I'll rub salt into the punctures—be damned if I don't!"

The excited old warrior executed a shuffling war-dance that was stopped only by his tendency to gout.

"Look here, young feller me lad," he puffed. "I'm never much good at beating about the bush. I

don't care whether the miniature is genuine or not, but I'm as expert as anybody and I'm willing to risk my own judgment. So I'll make you a bedrock offer of a hundred pounds—no, guineas—for it."

Percival sat down on the portico wall and put his flushed brow against a cool stone pillar.

RED LAC

'GAINST many floods, through countless years,
Astride the river by Lake Ku-ang,
Has stood the Bridge. High-arched,
Its flimsy span of gold and black
Is slight across a sky of deep vermilion.
The drooping willows overhang
Its parapets. Their cast-off leaves
Crisp under the hurrying feet and fleck
With pale gold the timbered footway.
A flight of geese, an open wedge
Of gilded wings, shears the bright sky.
And the river, age-old Hi-ho,
Between banks of weedy jet,
Slips under the feet of the travelers,
Swift and unheeded as the flying geese
Or the passage of the centuries.

T'ING AH-LING (*circa* A. D. 2345)
From "The Parodies of Percival"

CHAPTER IV

RED LAC

Go read your Scriptures: read that bluff about feedin' the young ravens an' sparrers. WOLFVILLE

I

WHEN Percival returned to town next morning, after spending the night under Sir Blunto's hospitable roof, he carried the general's check for one hundred and twenty odd pounds. In his delight over the Cosway miniature—of the genuineness of which he was in no doubt—the old soldier had not balked at an extra fifteen guineas for the best of Percival's sketches.

"You're an artist, my lad," said the general, "and if it wasn't for this hobby of mine—I confess I'm mad on the subject of miniatures—I'd buy a few more of your sketches. You're a young man of sense, and if you should happen on any more miniatures trust your own judgment and buy for me."

Percival gave his promise, and they parted good friends.

Percival's energy was immediately turned to the contemplated business with Mr. Hoggenbaum.

A few days previously he had come upon a red lacquer cabinet in the second-hand store of a dealer with whom he was on good terms, and on his arrival in town from Surrey he made straight for the little shop in Pimlico kept by Mr. John Henry.

"Ah, it's the lac cabinet, is it?" chuckled the little dealer when Percival explained his errand. "I thought you'd come back to it! No, it isn't sold. I've still got it." And he led the way into the farther recesses of his establishment.

It was a good-sized cabinet set on a stand with four short crooked legs, and the lac of it was of the richest and smoothest vermilion. A Chinese landscape in jet and gold decorated its panels. Pagodas and highly ornamental trees stood on the islands that dotted a reedy lake, and queer little men with pagoda hats or blatantly bald heads walked over funny little bridges in the company of trousered ladies with tiny feet. The metalwork of hinge and lock was of exquisite design. Altogether, the cabinet led to fractures of the tenth commandment.

"Do you like it?" asked Mr. John Henry, gleefully rubbing his hands.

"Who could help liking it?" said Percival. "It is a wonder. Where did you get it, John?"

"It isn't mine," the dealer explained. "Old Israels brought it in and wants me to sell it for him."

"I suppose he wants a lot of money for it?"

"No, it is really dirt cheap. Forty pounds is his lowest figure, but I could make him take thirty-five from you."

Percival examined the piece thoroughly. The front of the cabinet opened in two leaves, and behind the doors was a nest of drawers with open spaces under and between them. The faces of the drawers and the inside of the open cupboards were overlaid with the same lovely red, on which were superimposed simple designs in black and gold. The drawers, inside, were pasted over with that dull silver paper so common in the wooden tea-caddies of a century ago, and they gave forth a subdued fragrance as of long-gone potpourri or of spices. Indeed, scented dust nestled in the corners. Percival scrutinized the cabinet-making, but the first perfunctory glance was enough to satisfy him that the craftsman who had made the piece knew his work to admiration. The dovetailing of the sides of the drawers was close and accurate and each drawer slipped in and out on its runners with ease and without slackness.

"It's pretty good, isn't it?" asked John Henry.

Percival held out a drawer for the dealer's inspection.

"The man who made this," he said, "had the hands of an angel. Just look at the accuracy and finish of the dovetailing."

"Lovely," John Henry agreed. "I should say it was pretty old."

"I don't care if it was made yesterday," said Percival. "It is an exceptional piece of cabinet-making. How strong the perfume is even now—quaint, old-fashioned smell!" He turned the drawer upside down to smell it, and ran his hand along the bottom. His expression changed. "Hullo, hullo!" he exclaimed. "What's this?"

"What's what?"

"There's something stamped on the bottom," said Percival. "This particular slat is not old wood. Somebody has been faking here."

"How can that be?" the dealer demanded testily. "The old silver paper on the inside is absolutely intact."

"I can see that," Percival returned. "But how do you account for this slat having been treated with size and raw umber to give it the appearance of age? Look!" And he held out a stained finger-tip. "It isn't even spirit stain—it is distemper. And look at this stamping here."

The little dealer came closer and peered at the indicated marking.

"I can't make it out," he said.

"I think I can," declared Percival. "It reads to me like 'Grigor and Son, Distillers, Greenock. Nineteen hundred and something.'"

"Let me get a magnifying-glass," said John Henry. He examined the marking. "You're right," he agreed finally. "There has been some faking here. Yet the wood is cedar——"

"Some of the old-established Scottish distillers did not consider cedar or mahogany too good for their cases," said Percival. "This opens up a lot of possibilities. The fellow who would go to the length of faking the paper inside to cover one substitute slat—what would prevent him from faking the whole caboodle?"

"I dunno," said the dealer. "Crikey! And it does look like the genuine old lac!"

"To all intents and purposes it *is* genuine old lac—even if it had been put on just a week ago," Percival said. "The texture is lovely, and the color is a dream. Queer how upset some of us get if doubt is cast on the mere age of a thing. Personally I don't care a tinker's curse whether the cabinet is old or not. I say the fellow who made it was a fine craftsman, and the man who decorated it was an artist. Fancy going the length of faking a smell!"

"They'll fake anything these days," said John Henry bitterly. "You can't guarantee anything. I suppose you don't want the cabinet now?"

"Haven't I just said I don't care whether it was made yesterday or a hundred years ago?" demanded Percival. "I like it tremendously—and I think it will serve my purpose—so I'm going to try to buy it. I have no doubt in my own mind of its genuineness, but I'm not going to give old Israels thirty-five pounds for it if I can avoid it. What saith the ancient proverb? *Caveat emptor.* The reasonable doubt cast by the flaw is enough to justify me offering him less. I'll give him just half—seventeen pounds ten shillings."

"He'll never part with it for that——"

Percival closed the cabinet, and turned to wink at his friend. "Try him," he urged. "I'll go as far as twenty pounds for it."

"Maybe you'd better see Israels yourself," said John Henry. "You might persuade him sooner than I would."

"I'll persuade him," said Percival grimly—"if I need to take a club to him to do it. Thirty-five pounds for a cabinet like that! If it's genuine it is too little, if it's a fake it is too much. The man's daft—either way you look at it!"

II

Later in the day Percival again stood before the red lac cabinet. He had much money in notes in

his pocket, and he fingered them complacently while he faced Mr. Israels. He came straight to the point—but with a yawn.

"I'll give you fifteen guineas for the cabinet," he said.

Israels waved his hands on high, genuinely astonished.

"Fifteen guineas for a real old piece of red lacquer!" he shrieked. "What did you go to ask me in here for it if you don't mean to talk real business?"

"I don't think I have ever talked more serious business in my life," said Percival easily. "Have you by any chance examined the cabinet thoroughly?"

"Of course I've examined it," Israels replied. "What do you take me for to give good money away for a fake?"

"And, of course," said Percival, yawning with a hand politely on his lips, "of course you know a great deal about red lac?"

"I know enough to say this is a genuine piece," Israels returned grumpily.

"H'm!" said Percival. He ran a finger delicately over the cabinet while Israels watched him anxiously.

Secure in the knowledge that the man who was prepared to sell a piece he believed to be genuine old red lacquer for forty pounds did not know much

about the stuff, Percival went through an elaborate pantomime. He gradually worked up to finding the slat from the whisky case.

"Ah!" he said calmly, "as I thought. An excellent fake!"

"What do you mean—'fake'?" cried the distressed Israels.

Percival ignored him.

"Would you mind finding me a magnifying-glass, Mr. Henry?" he asked the nervous dealer, who scuttled away with great alacrity. When the glass was brought Percival held out the drawer to Israels and handed him the magnifier.

"Perhaps you would delight me by examining that stamp," he said.

"I don't see anything here," said the other sourly. "What stamp?"

"Let me show you," Percival volunteered, and laid a finger on the blemish. "Just there——"

"'Grigor and Sons, Distillers, Greenock. Nineteen hun——'" Israels read slowly. "Well, what about it?" he asked hardily. "That ain't nothing to worry about. Somebody's been and put the stamp there—just out of mischief."

"No, no. That idea will hardly wash, Mr. Israels. I am ready to admit it is quite an ingenious explanation—masterly, in fact. But that some one took this piece of furniture into a distillery to disfigure it

seems just the merest trifle far-fetched. Let me give my own hypothesis. The faker, whoever he was, in making the cabinet runs out of wood, and uses the first piece that comes handy—a piece of whisky-case, as it happens—and fails to obliterate the brand that ultimately will betray him. That is my idea—crude, I admit—but by its very crudity more plausible than your more polished conception."

"If it's a fake what do you want it for?" cried Israels.

"I like the shape and color of it," said Percival. "I don't care if it is a fake. But I am not paying fancy prices for second-hand bits of modern furniture. What did you pay for it?"

"That's my business!"

"Let us make a generous guess, then, at ten guineas," said Percival, completely unruffled. "I add a profit of fifty per cent. and offer you fifteen guineas altogether."

"Fifteen guineas! I wouldn't make a profit if I sold it at thirty!"

"Nonsense, Mr. Israels. You'd be doing handsomely at fifteen, I'm certain. How did you come by it?"

"In the ordinary way of business," said Israels sullenly. "I took it for a debt. Look here, you can have it for twenty-five!"

"Disabuse your mind of any belief that my offer

will be raised, Mr. Israels," said Percival. "I have stated my limit—fifteen guineas."

The bargaining lasted for some time. Israels became vociferous. He pleaded, grew simply adamantine, only to soften suddenly when Percival, thinking of the success of the manœuver with MacIsaac, turned to the door. Then Israels almost wept. Finally, when Percival thought he had the seller sufficiently worked up, he produced notes for seventeen pounds ten shillings, and counted them over carefully. This was too much for Mr. Israels. He held out twitching fingers—and the cabinet passed into the possession of Percival Pemblebury.

III

It was on Wednesday forenoon that Percival bought the cabinet. His purchase money was no sooner in the hands of Mr. Israels than he was making arrangements for conveying the piece to his rooms in Soho. Percival was in a hurry. He proposed selling the cabinet to the unsuspecting Hoggenbaum on the Friday, and he proposed selling it for as stiff a price as he could get for it. But it was not his purpose to let the cabinet pass into the hands of Mr. Hoggenbaum without showing the suspicious slat. If, therefore, he was going to solve the mystery of the piece of packing-case in an other-

wise perfect example of red lacquer, so that the price would not be affected, he would have to move quickly.

Having had the cabinet conveyed to his rooms in Timkins's Yard he immediately set about cleaning it carefully, particularly in the interstices of the metalwork, where dust had accumulated. When the cleaning was done to his satisfaction he set the door of the cabinet open and stood two reproduction pieces of Nankin ware, bought for the purpose, inside it. A gilt Buddha that he had possessed for some time, and a pair of round-bellied satellites in Chinese ware, he placed on top of the cabinet.

The cabinet was wonderful, and it puzzled him. He examined it time and again, and each time was convinced that the lac was as fine as he had ever seen. That some modern craftsman had managed to imitate the beauty of the older lacquer was to Percival an unbelievable theory, and his puzzlement lasted. Though at times his theories would indeed lead him almost to believing that the offending slat betrayed the whole thing as a fake, his more persistent ideas would have it that the slat was the last piece of evidence for proving the cabinet genuine.

As he pondered the problem his gaze fell on the dust-pan into which he had swept the dust and stuff from the cabinet, and at the sight of a little fragment of wood among the *débris* his eyes lost their dreami-

ness. He picked the fragment gingerly from among the dust and examined it carefully. It was only about half an inch square, a chip from a thin board, but to one side of it there tightly adhered a tiny scrap of painted canvas, coarse of texture. The pigment was distemper, and the fragment was at once identifiable as a piece of that stuff known in theaters as "profile"—the material used by scene-builders for the fretworked edges of set-pieces. Percival remembered removing the chip from one of the inside corners of the base of the cabinet.

"Percival S. Holmes," he admonished himself, "clear the deduction box and get to work; turn your trained and powerful mind to the consideration of red lacquer in connection with the theater!"

Theater, red lac—red lac, theater? Percival whipped his mind into action. He thought back to the many productions he had seen on the London stage, and tried to conjure up a scene in which there had been a piece of red lacquer.

Before he remembered a production in which red lacquer had figured his memory had carried him far back to before the War. He recalled a play produced by Sir George Bingham at the Westminster, and with that he remembered a further point. Sir George Bingham had died in the early days of the War, but Percival remembered an oft-repeated piece of gossip in the Press to the effect that the actor-

manager's chief hobby had been the collection of pieces of lacquer. Then, thinking back to the productions he had seen at the Westminster Theater, he remembered that wherever possible in his scenes Sir George Bingham had introduced a lacquered piece.

The recollection spurred Percival into immediate activity. He picked up his hat and went across Timkin's Yard to the stage-door of the theater there.

Although he had never entered that exclusive portal in all the days of his sojourn opposite it Percival had a nodding acquaintance with the doorkeeper, and that official for once forgot to be brusque to a non-professional member of the public.

"Property-man, sir?" he said, in answer to Percival's query. "Why, Long Tom is property-man for the people wot's running this show—Long Tom Gibson. We calls him Long Tom because of his reach," he explained. "If 'e gets into a fight 'e just 'its a man once—on the Hadams happle—and the fight's finished. Wot was it you wanted of Long Tom, may I harsk?'

"I wondered if he could tell me who was property-man to Sir George Bingham at the Westminster before the War—and where he is now, if still alive."

"I don't think Long Tom'll be much use to you for that, sir—but 'e might know. New to London, Long Tom is—ain't been about the London theaters for more than ten years. I'll see, sir."

The doorkeeper came out of his hutch and went to the head of a flight of stairs, leading, apparently, to the bowels of the earth. "Props!" he shouted in stentorian tones. "Props be-lah-oo!"

From the depths there came a muffled answer: "'Ullo?"

"Long Tom dahn there?"

"Yus! 'Oo wants 'im?"

"Gen'leman wants to speak to 'im."

"Orlright—keep yore 'air on. I'm comin'."

Presently, at the head of the stairs, there appeared a singularly tall man with the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to above the biceps of a pair of remarkably long arms. Despite the fact that the rest of his costume consisted of bibbed brown overalls he wore a dilapidated bowler in precarious fashion on the back of his head. This worthy regarded Percival with suspicion for a moment, then ignored him pointedly to turn to the doorkeeper.

"Yus?" he asked hoarsely.

"This is the gentleman wot lives oppersyte—'im that sings in the mornin'," the doorkeeper explained.

"Yus—well?" Long Tom said sourly.

"'E wants to know if you knew 'oo was props at the Westminster in Sir George Bingham's time."

"Wot for?'

"Gen'leman 'as a pertickler reason for harskin,' Tom—a partiklar reason."

Long Tom rubbed his face vigorously with a very dirty hand, then scratched his chin reflectively.

"Ah," he said, at last. "Gentleman don't look like a bailiff—so I'll tell yer. It'd be old Jimmy Sandham—*you* know—ginger bloke with knobs on 'is 'ead—thahsands ov 'em. 'E was props to Sir George for years—saved money on it too and bought 'ouse property over in Brixton."

"I know the bloke you mean—little ginger bloke with side-wings and knobs. Wot's 'appened to 'im?"

"Still makin' props as far as I knows—got a shop over in Kennington. If the gen'leman wants ter know the haddress, 'e'll find it in the phone-book."

And with a nod to the doorkeeper, but without a look at Percival, Long Tom would have disappeared into the depths had Percival not stopped him.

"Mr. Gibson," said Percival. "One moment!"

Long Tom stopped. "That's me," he said.

"I suppose you can drink a pint as well as any one?" asked Percival.

"I can drink a quart better than most," said Long Tom pointedly.

"I regret very much that at the moment I can't ask you to come and have one with me," said Percival politely. "It is closing time—and I must get over to Kennington immediately. In the circumstances you won't mind if I hand you the cost of a drink instead?"

"Sir," said Long Tom, "you puts it in such a gentlemanly way, as from one man to another, that I can't refuse you."

And his fingers closed over the half-crown that Percival put into his grimy palm. Next moment the depths engulfed him.

To look up the telephone directory supplied by the doorkeeper, to find the address he wanted, and to leave another half-crown with his helpful acquaintance occupied but a minute or two. Percival found a taxi and was borne rapidly to Kennington.

IV

Mr. Sandham was a precise little old man with something of the grand manner that had made his late employer, Sir George Bingham, the favorite actor of the ladies of the latter days of the Victorian era. In his voice, too, were faint echoes of the cultured diction which had distinguished the deceased actor, so that altogether the little property-man was a rather travestied pocket imitation of his former master. The "thahsands ov knobs" diminished to one bunion growth on his forehead, but his whiskers were unmistakably ginger of hue.

He received Percival with grave, almost exaggerated, courtesy and led the way to his office with an air as if the little cubicle had been the bureau of

a statesman at least, and he offered Percival a chair with a gesture worthy of a fine piece of Stuart rather than the dilapidated thing of crazy legs and broken cane which was actually there.

Percival explained his errand at some length, and finished by rapidly sketching the cabinet he had just purchased. He did not mention the whisky slat, however.

"You are perfectly correct in your surmise, Mr. Pemblebury," said the little property-maker. "I was for many years with the late Sir George—what a loss to the stage was his untimely death! If I may quote the words of the poet, Mr. Pemblebury, we ne'er shall look upon his like again! Sir George was a great gentleman, sir—and I was honored by his friendship. I had no heart to remain at the Westminster Theater after he was gone!"

"The feeling does you credit, Mr. Sandham," said Percival gravely.

"But in the matter of this red lacquer," Mr. Sandham went on with a sigh and a bow in acknowledgment of the compliment, "Sir George was indeed a conneysoor, and he loved to see a piece of red lacquer in his scenes. Many a piece have I copied for him, for of course Sir George did not care to have his valuable originals knocking round the theater. We had to copy them in the theater, there being no room in Sir George's house for that sort of work. You

may imagine that it was something of a responsibility to have those valuable bits in the property-room. Anything might have happened to them, and then Sir George would have been terribly angry. Now, in the matter of this particular cabinet which you have sketched so beautifully, Mr. Pemblebury, I can tell you of a peculiar circumstance———"

"You recognize it as having belonged to Sir George's collection?" Percival asked eagerly.

"Either that or a piece remarkably like it, Mr. Pemblebury," was the reply. "A cabinet just like that was the gem of his collection. I might go as far as to say that it was the very Happle of 'is Heye." For a moment the polish disappeared from Mr. Sandham's diction, but he rescued it immediately. "I was about to say that it was strange that the one accident we had should have happened to the very best piece of lac Sir George possessed—the cabinet you have sketched. At this distance from the actual occurrence I have no objection to telling you the story. It was like this:

"I had a man working for me then, a thumbless fellow named Tom Brown. Well, Tom pulled out one of the drawers of the cabinet we were copying, and he carelessly let it slip through his fingers. It fell right on the sharp end of one of the stage braces—of iron, Mr. Pemblebury—and the point knocked a hole clean through the bottom. Picture

my horror! I dreaded Sir George's anger if he found out, and between you and me, Mr. Pemblebury, I was afraid that discovery would result in my dismissal. The gem of his collection! There was nothing for it but to deceive him, and mend it before he saw it again."

"You interest me very much, Mr. Sandham," said Percival, suppressing a tendency to become excited.

"I worked all night on the job," the property-man went on. "The cabinet drawers were lined with that dull old silver paper—not foil, but a silver paper, very difficult to secure—but fortunately I had saved up an amount of it, and it was lying in the property-room. I had to break it down, of course. The trouble was to procure a piece of seasoned cedar in a hurry—but fortunately here again I was in luck. I confess it was a delicate job fitting the cedar in. But the curious thing, Mr. Pemblebury, is where I got the cedar from. Now, what would you think I used to replace the broken slat, Mr. Pemblebury?"

"You used part of a bin case from a Greenock whisky distillery, Mr. Sandham," said Percival.

The little man stared in amazement for a moment.

"God bless my soul!" he ejaculated. "How did you know that? I used part of one of the cases in which Sir George always got his whisky—he was very particular about his whisky and always pro-

cured it from Greenock, I remember well. But surely I left no trace?"

"The cabinet is now in my possession, Mr. Sandham," said Percival. "The stamp on the slat was not entirely obliterated—it is still decipherable."

"Heavens!" cried the little man in a tremble. "If Sir George had found it! What a providential escape! I could not have looked him in the face. I planed the slat, and treated it with raw umber to tone it with the rest, but—you say the stamp is still readable?"

"It was for an explanation of that that I came to you."

"The light was never good at night-time in the property-room. I must have missed the stamp," Sandham breathed.

"Tell me," said Percival, "what happened to Sir George's collection after his death?"

"Certain of the pieces went to one of the museums—the best of them—except this particular cabinet which was left to a lady friend of Sir George's. A widow lady, a lady in rather poor circumstances. It was the only thing Sir George left her, for she was very independent. There was talk at the time that she was Sir George's mistress, but that was a lie, sir—a very wicked lie. She was not that sort of lady at all. Nor was Sir George that sort of man. I knew her. She lived, I think, in Ebury Street. Her name was Fotheringill—Mrs. Fotheringill."

"Thank you, Mr. Sandham. I am very deeply grateful to you," said Percival, as he rose to depart. He thought of the nicest thing he could say to the old man, and went on. "Let me thank you most of all for the rare courtesy you have shown me, sir. It is seldom, in these days, that one meets with such charming politeness."

The little man flushed with pleasure.

"Politeness was the habit in the Westminster Theater," he replied. "To be with Sir George was to be educated in courtesy, sir. 'The glass of fashion and the mold of form,' as Shakespeare says."

They shook hands warmly, and the little man led the way to the door. There Percival turned on a sudden recollection.

"By the way, Mr. Sandham, what peculiar scent was it you used to take away the smell of paste and glue?"

"Bless my heart!" gasped the little "props." "There's no escaping you, young man. I sent Tom Brown out for three penny bottles of perfume from a slot machine—and mixed them———"

V

At a quarter to one o'clock on Friday afternoon Percival walked casually into the restaurant of L'Escargot d'Or. Laverdet was standing in the

background beside the service door, and he gave a quick nod of intelligence and a flickering glance toward a particular table.

It was a table for two, and a fairly stout man sat at it. This was Mr. Hoggenbaum, Percival's intended victim.

Percival strolled over and laid a hand on the vacant chair. Mr. Hoggenbaum looked up with a scowl and met Percival's most disarming smile.

"There are completely vacant tables, I know," said Percival, "but I feel the need of human sympathy and bright society. My very keen understanding of human nature leads me to believe that in you I shall secure both."

Mr. Hoggenbaum made choking noises over his soup.

"As you may judge, it is not *ennui* which leads me to seek your charming company," Percival went on. "The fact is that I am elated over a piece of astounding luck."

"Well, sit down—and—and don't talk like a Victorian novel," said Mr. Hoggenbaum. "What's your bit of luck?"

"Do you know anything about red lacquer?" asked Percival, making, like a good general, his attack at once.

Mr. Hoggenbaum pricked up his ears—literally—for he had a loose scalp.

"I know a good bit about red lac," he admitted modestly.

Percival took a photograph from his pocket and held it out for inspection.

"What would you say if I told you that I had just bought this exceptional cabinet from the collection of the late Sir George Bingham?" And he kept a hand on the photograph.

"Will you let the dam' thing go and let me have a look?" said Mr. Hoggenbaum testily, as he began to fumble for his glasses.

"Pardon!" said Percival, and let go. He brought out a magnifying-glass. He did not need such an aid to eyesight himself, but he thought he would look more of a connoisseur if he had one about him. Mr. Hoggenbaum snatched it, and began to pore over the photograph. His face grew red.

"Young man," he said, "if this is a genuine bit you're a lucky young fellow. What do you want for it, provided it is real?"

"I have every proof that it is real," said Percival, "but it is not for sale."

"Young man," said Mr. Hoggenbaum with a shrewd smile, "though I sometimes frequent a cheap restaurant I am worth a quarter of a million. I made it in scrap metal, and a man doesn't do that without learning something. You didn't come up to me by accident. Somebody's been talkin' about me. Come

along, now. Where can I have a look at it and when? And how much do you want for it?"

Percival held up two hands.

"I give in," he said with one of his wide, cheerful grins. "You can have a look at the cabinet after luncheon and within five minutes' walk from here. Hadn't we better leave consideration of what I'll take for it, or what you'll offer for it, until then? Meantime, let me tell you a story——"

He told Hoggenbaum of the slat from the whisky-case and how, through Sandham, it had established the identity of the red lac cabinet—established, too, its authenticity; for every piece in Sir George Bingham's collection had been beyond question.

"It's a great story, young man," said Hoggenbaum, "and I like the way you've tracked the thing down. But I'd like to see that fellow Sandham, and have the story verified."

"I anticipated that. Mr. Sandham's to be at my place at a quarter to two. He'll bear out all I've told you," said Percival.

"Well, you've spoiled my luncheon, anyhow, so buck up and we'll go round to—what's its name?—Timkin's Yard as soon as you like."

Percival finished his luncheon and took Mr. Hoggenbaum round to his rooms. The prospective buyer was much too shrewd to become enthusiastic over the cabinet, but Percival could see that Hoggenbaum was impressed. The stout man went over the cabi-

net carefully and examined the piece of whisky-case with interest. After that he sat in one of Percival's most comfortable chairs and feasted his eyes on the beauty of the piece. Discussion of the terms of sale was deferred until the story was confirmed by Sandham.

The little property-man was prompt to time, and he courteously explained to Hoggenbaum all that he knew of the history of the cabinet.

"Yes—well," said Hoggenbaum at last, "I'm prepared to buy the cabinet, Mr. Pemblebury. What do you want for it?"

"What'll you give for it?" Percival returned.

"Come, come, young man," said Hoggenbaum with a twinkle, "you ought to know more about the ethics of business than that! You can't make me buyer and seller too, you know."

"I suppose not," Percival replied. "I'd forgotten that commonplace of business. Well———"

He turned away from the cabinet and Hoggenbaum to consider the price he had fixed in his mind, and he found himself gazing into the eyes of the little property-maker. With a jolt he realized that these eyes were somehow full of reproach, and for a moment he gazed dreamily at the old man. Then he understood.

"Good God, yes!" he whispered to himself. "I'd forgotten that!"

He went up to the property-man.

"Mr. Sandham," he said quietly, "I beg your pardon. It was unforgivable of me. I understand. Is she, then, still alive?"

"As far as I can make out, Mr. Pemblebury," said the old man, "she is. After your visit yesterday I took the trouble to go over to Pimlico and make inquiries. Mrs. Fotheringill, sir, has been in great distress. She got into debt, and the cabinet was seized on a judgment summons at the instance of a Jew called Israels."

"I know—or at least I ought to have known," Percival said contritely. "Where is she now?"

"I couldn't discover, sir. She went with her daughter into the country, but I could not find out the name of the place. She did not slip off on the quiet, sir. As far as I know—as far as I could find out—she sold most of her stuff, paid her debts like the lady she is and went off with dignity, sir."

Mr. Hoggenbaum had grown impatient and would have spoken, but Percival, catching the intention, silenced the stout man with an imperious gesture.

"One moment, Mr. Hoggenbaum," he said quietly. "Yes, Mr. Sandham?"

"If you would be so good, sir," pleaded the little "props." "Let me for the sake of the lady my old master was so fond of—let me for the memory of Sir George himself—as you are a gentleman, sir—let me offer you a price for the cabinet."

"So that—?"

"So that one day I may be able to return it to whom it properly belongs," said the little man with quiet dignity.

"By Christopher!" said Percival. "I knew it!"

He turned to Mr. Hoggenbaum.

"I am sorry to have wasted your time, Mr. Hoggenbaum," he said, "but, after all, I find that I can not sell the cabinet. It does not belong to me."

"But you said you had paid for it!" cried Hoggenbaum.

"In law, I suppose," said Percival, "the cabinet is mine. But there are considerations beyond law. I can not sell you the cabinet until I get permission to do so from the lady to whom Sir George Bingham gave it. You have heard what has passed between Mr. Sandham and myself, and you will have put two and two together and found the explanation."

Mr. Hoggenbaum stared at Percival for a space, then shrugged his shoulders in comical dismay.

"Young man," he said, "I'm a hard business man—hard as nails. If that cabinet had been mine, and I didn't collect the stuff as I do—I mean, if I had been you I'd have sold it as was my absolute right. But I see what you mean, and upon my Sam I respect you for it."

He held out his fat fist and gripped Percival's in a hard grip.

"I'd have offered you a hundred and fifty guineas for that cabinet—I mean I'd have gone that far to buy it," he went on. "And what I say now is, that if ever you find the old lady that had it, and she is willing to sell—well, you can offer her another fifty for it. That's me. That's Phil Hoggenbaum all over. Two hundred for the cabinet if she wants to part with it. Good-bye, Mr. Pemblebury. I don't know that your point of view is quite sane, but upon my Sam I like it! Good-bye, Mr. What's-your-name? Pleased to meet you!"

And Mr. Hoggenbaum let himself down the stairs forthwith.

"Mr. Pemblebury," said the little property-man, "I won't insult you by making any further offer to buy the cabinet. You are a gentleman, sir, that it would have been an honor even for my late good master to know—and he was the finest gentleman in the world. Good-bye, sir. God bless you!"

Next minute Percival was alone in his rooms, staring hard at the red lac cabinet.

SOHO SWILL

IN summer-time in Soho,
The smells are ever nigh;
Round all the streets you'll sniff them
From gratings close and by,
And they're—well—sometimes high.

Here of a sunlit noonday
My love and I would stroll,
I'd hope that she I loved would
Her appetite control
With omelette and a roll.

The smells would rise and tell her
Of grill-rooms far away,
"Go to the Ritz, my beauty,
And eat the proper way."
But I would make her stay.

And I would turn and answer
Those strong and urgent smells,
"If I'd the money on me,
As sure as hell has bells
She'd eat among the swells."

But when the snows at Christmas,
As usual, came as rain,
My love rose up and whispered
She'd eat with me again,
But no more "down a drain."

They make one omelette only,
Girl there is none to see,
Fair coffee follows after,
But in a huff is she.
She never eats with me.

The smells they smell in Soho,
And still they seem to crow,
"Go to the Ritz, my beauty——"
Oh, noisome smells, sing low;
If I'd the cash—*I'd go!*

"A Soho Son" by A. I. GREEKMAN
From "The Parodies of Percival"

CHAPTER V

METAMORPHOSIS OF THE GOLDEN SNAIL

"You are a painter, are you not?"
"Yes, certainly. Why should I not be a painter?"
IBSEN

I

IN THE meantime Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet remained in a state of the most intense curiosity. Mr. Percival Pemblebury had been rather too mysterious for Laverdet's taste, and the stout *restaurateur* felt something like a man who had been asked to dinner and had been given a chair to watch his host operate alone with knife and fork. Since the day when he had received payment of the small bill he had not exchanged a single word with Percival. He had seen the approach to Mr. Hoggenbaum and had seen the departure from the restaurant, and since then the curiosity of the good Laverdet had grown more intense every hour, until, finally, it blossomed into something like resentment.

Laverdet, therefore, was inclined to be surly when, in the late afternoon of the Friday, Percival strolled into the restaurant nonchalantly to wake the proprietor from a snatched restless sleep in the serving pantry.

"Ah," said Monsieur Laverdet sourly, "and so, my friend, you at last condescend to arrive."

"I not only condescend to arrive, my good Archambaud," said Percival cheerily, "but I also condescend to hand you what is known to the vulgar as a sizable slice of oof."

And he held out a slip of paper beautifully engraved to his one-time creditor.

Monsieur Laverdet took the slip gingerly between finger and thumb, and would have examined it scornfully. Instead of which his eyebrows shot up so that he was the picture of amazement.

"This is a check for one hundred and twenty pounds!" he gasped. "Written out for me—Archambaud Laverdet. I do not understan'."

"But it is perfectly simple," said Percival. "I have just sold a perfectly good sketch to General Sir Blundo Blunderstone for the perfectly good sum of fifteen guineas."

"But this is for one hundred and twenty pounds!"

"Ah, yes. The remaining one hundred guineas is the result of trade, my dear Archambaud—of commerce. I also sold Sir Blunto a quite good miniature."

"I wish, my friend," said Laverdet pathetically, "that you would not be so—what do you call it?—obscure. At the beginning of the week you are without a penny. On Tuesday you enter my restaurant with many notes and you pay off the bill you owe me. You rush out, and I do not see you until Friday, when you walk with an *aplomb* most admirable to the table of Monsieur Hoggenbaum, whom you entice away ver' early. A little later you return, and you show me a check for one hundred and twenty pounds from somebody—Sir Blunto Blunderstone—of whom until this moment there has not been the slightest wind of a word! What, then, did you do with Monsieur Hoggenbaum?"

"I had the melancholy satisfaction of refusing to sell a red lacquer cabinet to Mr. Hoggenbaum for the sum of a hundred and fifty pounds. I imagine that I might even have had two hundred——"

Monsieur Laverdet waved his fingers at the ceiling.

"Sanctified blue vault of the sky!" he said. "Then why entice the man away from his lunch? Why infuse him with an excitement that for a man of his build must be a danger? Why——?"

Words failed him. He folded his arms and sat down hastily on the nearest chair, whence he glared at Percival after sundry bewildered noddings of his head. Percival smiled at him and walked over to pat him kindly on the shoulder.

"That is right, Laverdet," he said soothingly. "Better take it sitting. I shall explain."

He took a seat opposite the bemused *restaurateur* and launched into the story of his doings since the Tuesday, explaining finally how it came about that he would not sell the cabinet.

"So there it is, my dear Archambaud," he finished. "While legally I had every right to sell the cabinet, no pukka sahib could do it—now could he?"

"What is he—this—pukka sa'b?" asked the bewildered Laverdet.

"The pukka sahib," said Percival gravely, "is a white man who plays cricket every hour of his life and that, preferably, with his back to the wall."

"Saperlotte!" cried Laverdet. "What a way to exist!"

"It is not always comfortable," Percival agreed, "but it has its compensations. When he shaves in the morning the pukka sahib has emotions at the contemplation of his own reflection. He murmurs to himself, 'A pukka sahib with his back to the wall—playing cricket!' He looks into his eyes with the satisfaction that they are the orbs of a white man."

"Palsembleu!" groaned Laverdet. "But one plays that game with a ball, a club, and three crickets—which gives the name, no doubt. What has that to do with your nobility of refusing to sell the cabinet?

For," he went on, with tears in his eyes, "it was noble of you not to sell. It was magnanimous—amazing!"

"Pooh!" said Percival.

"But after all," said Laverdet, "in a few days you have made one hundred and twenty pounds, and I congratulate you, my friend."

He picked the check up from the table and, with a lingering look at it, held it out to Percival.

"My dear Archambaud," said Percival, "I do not want the thing."

"But—but what have I to do with it?"

"Why, you place it to the credit of your account," said Percival. "I would have paid it into my account but for the fear that it would increase the impatience of my bank manager. There is the matter of a small overdraft, but that must wait. So I had the general make it out to you. And stay—here is another twenty pounds in notes. You must use it and the amount of the check exactly as if they were your own money. I have collected a net one hundred and fifty, but I must retain about ten pounds for the campaign to boost the Golden Snail."

Once more the eyes of Laverdet grew moist.

"But, my ver' good friend," said he, "this generosity is too good—too kind. It paralyzes the tongue. I ask you harshly for the little bill you owe me, and you repay my harshness with the loan of

one hundred and forty pounds. Your magnanimity is completely noble. It overwhelms. It brings unmanly tears to the eyes!"

He arose and came across to Percival with his muscular arms outstretched. To avoid the impending embrace Percival retreated behind the table.

"My dear old lad," he said quietly, "there's nothing in it. I told you that if I put my trained and powerful mind to the job the finding of the money would be the merest detail. I am going to give L'Escargot d'Or a terrific boost. On Wednesday next I come here as waiter——"

"But, my good friend," Laverdet protested, "there is no need now for you to come as waiter. I can easily re-engage Alphonse——"

"No, no. If Alphonse has already found another place let him go. It is essential for the boost that I should take his place here."

"But——"

"Everything is prepared, *mon ami*. You must leave it to me, really. For the moment—farewell—or at least *au revoir*. I have a lot to do before nightfall. By the way, what do you think of lemon-yellow as a color?"

"It is a good enough color—very attractive," said the unwary Laverdet. "Why?"

"Glad you like it. I think it would be very suitable for the exterior of L'Escargot d'Or. I must go and have some made up——"

"But I do not wish the restaurant repainted," said Laverdet. "Especially lemon-yellow!"

"Lemon-yellow," Percival murmured dreamily, ignoring Laverdet's protest, "lemon-yellow, yes—picked out with bright emerald-green."

"But——"

"I quite agree, Laverdet," Percival said heartily. "It is not a very new combination, but it has the merit of expressing spring-time. Pale mauve and primrose would be sweeter, but I doubt its appeal to the popular taste. Lemon and emerald will certainly give the impression of rejuvenescence."

"I think——" Laverdet began.

"So do I," Percival interrupted. "But we haven't the time. We must do the best we can with a few new pictures—say, by that modern painter, Percival Pemblebury."

"A few new pictures?" Laverdet gasped.

"Yes, *mon cher* Archambaud—for the inside of the restaurant. It is a great pity we haven't time to redecorate the interior. The outside can be done quite without interference with the business of the restaurant. I know you have set your heart on pale mauve and primrose for the interior, but I assure you it would be quite impossible."

"I do not wish the restaurant altered at all," moaned Laverdet. "Lemon-yellow and emerald!"

"Now don't quit the job before it has begun,"

said Percival. "If there's one thing I hate it's a quitter. *Au revoir* once more, my dear Archambaud—*ne perds pas courage*—in other words, keep up your nerve!"

As Percival strode off Laverdet seemed to attempt lifting himself by his own hair. Apparently failing in this endeavor the stout *restaurateur* waved two despairing hands at high heaven, shrugged his broad shoulders, put his hands deep in his trousers pockets, turned and entered his premises, the picture of despondency.

Percival whistled cheerfully as he walked down Shaftesbury Avenue. At Piccadilly Circus he swung lightly aboard a crowded Chelsea bus, remembered his opulence, changed his mind and dropped off, leaving a plethoric conductor in a state verging on apoplexy. He hailed a taxi and got in.

II

Twenty minutes later Percival played a *fantasia* on a bell-pull that hung by the door of a white-painted building which had the appearance of a stable. An answering roar came from inside the building.

"Hey, you! D'ye think this a houff that ye want tae wauk the deid? Gaun, ya boss-e'ed ghaist o' a Cockney cauf, ya aitchless paidler o' chalk an'

watter, ya——" And the voice soared up to heights unprintable and untranslatable, as shuffling footsteps neared the gate.

The little let-in door of the large gate jerked back violently and a shock of tousled hair shot out. The gentleman of the tousled head presented rather a floury appearance; his shaggy brows and hair were powdered with white dust. The grumbling died down and the brows shot up as Percival was recognized by his friend Farquhar, Scots sculptor.

"Auch, it's you, Percy, is it?" grinned the Scot. "Ah thocht it was the milkman. Ah aince telled the whistlin' jackass no tae mak' Chelsea hideous wi' his wheetlin', an' since then he's wreaked himsel' on the bell. But I micht ha'e recognized your touch on the glockenspiel. Come awa' ben, ma mannie!"

Thus invited Percival stepped over the threshold.

"How goes the mud-pushing, Farquhar?" he said.

"Oh, none too bad," said Farquhar, who spoke broad Scots only when he chose. "How goes the paint-slinging?"

"Don't talk to me of paint-slinging. I've turned curio dealer—I've just sold at a hundred guineas a miniature which I bought for two pounds ten."

"Is it the truth you're telling, or are ye back at the old game of leg-pulling?"

"Fact, you old sludge-slapper. I'm going into the restaurant business on the proceeds."

"What's the time, Percy?"

"Just past five-thirty—but what's that got to do with it?"

The Scot reached for his hat.

"Come round to the Peal o' Bells," said he. "This mystery can only be penetrated properly on beer."

"Now, ye destroyer of good canvas, spin your yarn," Farquhar said when they were seated with the proper equipment at a round table.

As the plot was unfolded to him the Scot burst into unwonted mirth.

"Man," said he breathlessly, "I'm going to have a hand in this ploy. By the beard o' Methuselah, I'll come and be a *garçon* too!"

"It would spoil the game if two of us did it, Farquhar; but you can do one thing—no, two things—to help the game along."

"Ye can call on me, Percy, to the whole of my worldly goods. What's my part of the job?"

"I want you to make me a large-sized snail-shell in plaster, about a foot high, with a hook cast into it to hang it by——"

"Huh! A sign for the *auberge,* no doubt," said the canny Scot. "You will want a fancy shell varnished and gilded?"

"Got it in one, Farquhar."

"Consider it done, ma mannie, and get on to the next order."

"I want you next to chase round among your pals on the Press—your countrymen and others," said Percival. "Get 'em to paragraph the event in as many papers as possible——"

"*Tenez!*—bide a wee," said the Scot. "We've got to see the copy's good enough before the journalists will touch it."

"But surely the fact of an artist turning waiter is good enough for a paragraph or so?"

"My dear bairn, what may seem a big affair to you needn't necessarily set the Thames afire; but I'll see what I can do. It'll be for Thursday mornin', the publishing?"

"Yes, Thursday's papers, if possible. When will you finish the golden snail?"

"I'll model it the night and make the cast. I'll cast it to-morrow, Saturday, and scrape, varnish and gild it—ye can have it for Sunday."

It was further agreed that Farquhar should have a hand with the sign-writing part of the decorative scheme, and the two parted on these terms.

The restaurant of L'Escargot d'Or was still in the quiet that sits between lunch and dinner when Percival astonished Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet by staggering in under a huge burden. The load

consisted mainly of paint-pots, brushes and white cotton coats.

"I'll trouble you to pay the taxi, *mon ami,*" Percival grunted. "I'm absolutely cleaned out."

Laverdet waddled out in a great hurry and came back with the air of a man determined to settle some question once and for all.

"My friend," he said grimly, "I must make you understan' that the game is finish'. It is too much for the nerves to contemplate. I make the *omelette aux fines herbes,* and it turn me sick of the stomach to look at it—it is lemon-yellow and emerald-green. I put the mayonnaise over the salad—it is lemon-yellow and emerald-green——"

"Put more vinegar into the mayonnaise and blanch it a bit," Percival suggested.

"It is not that. I am haunted by the combination of tints. They stare at me out of everything all afternoon"— Monsieur Laverdet paused to mop his brow—"and to finish, instead of putting the caramel over the custard to make the *crème caramel,* I automatically reach down the good *crème de menthe* and spill it over the dishes. It is too much. I can stand no more!"

"Stop a bit, Laverdet. Did you taste the mixture?"

"No. I have too much of the emerald-green and lemon-yellow already."

"Lead me to it, *mon ami.* I wish to inspect this wonder."

Laverdet sourly led the way to the back premises.

"There you are," said he, pointing to a row of dishes in which blobs of custard swam in *crème de menthe.*

Percival reached for a spoon and tasted the concoction. Laverdet watched his face with interest, for Percival's first expression seemed to be one of astonishment, and his second dreamy rapture.

Monsieur Laverdet took a spoon then and gingerly tasted the stuff.

"Nom d'un nom!" he gasped *"C'est épatant!"*

"Isn't it?" Percival agreed. "If you can't concoct a sweet out of that you deserve never to handle a spoon again. Hail, Archambaud, discoverer of *la crème printemps!"*

And taking advantage of Laverdet's absorption he stole noiselessly from the kitchen.

III

The countenance of Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet held an expression in which pain mingled with exasperation. He felt that he was being jockeyed into a scheme of things which was entirely alien to his set notions of propriety. With despair he viewed the exterior of the restaurant rapidly assume a hue

of bright lemon under the busy brushes of Messrs. Pemblebury and Farquhar, quondam artist and sculptor respectively.

But in spite of his irritation he had to admit that Messrs. Pemblebury and Farquhar knew their job. If power of attraction was wanted for the restaurant of L'Escargot d'Or certainly it was in the way of receiving it. In the dingy street the bright lemon struck a note which was nothing if not distinctive. It caught all eyes. Like some stray sun, it shot its rays afar and smote the eyeballs without reck or ruth. It seemed to shine even round corners, for people turned masked angles with evident anticipation of something doing. And once in the direct rays of the burnished restaurant they stopped to contemplate the spectacle.

So that Monsieur Laverdet was not the only spectator. He shared the exhibition with many people, washed and unwashed, who stood in open-mouthed awe to watch the busy brushes of the decorators. The exasperation of Laverdet was increased, if anything, by the presence of these people. He felt that he would not like to have them in his restaurant. He had a vague idea that something had gone wrong with the mechanism.

Messrs. Pemblebury and Farquhar, however, had none of the qualms which troubled the soul of Laverdet. Clad in brand new white coats they sat on

their temporary scaffolding and went about their work with easy concentration. They chatted—or, at least, Percival Pemblebury did—with entire oblivion of the folks below.

"I bethink me, Farquhar," said Percival, laying down his brush to light a cigarette, "I bethink me that the decorative scheme might usefully be extended."

"Aye?" Farquhar grunted. He too laid down his brush—his pipe had gone out and he wanted a match.

"What do you think of a trifle of stenciling down the pilasters—something gay and charming—golden *escargots* feeding happily off emerald-green leaves?"

"I'm all for simplicity," said Farquhar, between puffs of his pipe. "I don't incline to the belief that elaboration pays. A plain scheme of yellow and green, to my mind, hits off the situation brawly."

Percival swung his leg over the elevated plank and came astraddle, the better to pursue the argument. The plank wobbled dangerously as a result.

"Canny wi' the gymnastics, Percy!" protested Farquhar. "Ye'll bear in mind that I'm a heavyweight an' unlikely tae fa' gently. Besides, ye'll tak' note o' the pent-pots."

"If this were an artistic—you'll forgive the word—an artistic scheme *ad hoc,* I should be in complete agreement, my dear Sandy———"

"My name's Stephen, I'll have ye know."

"Now, there's a curious thing. All the years I have known you I've been under the impression that the 'S' stood for Sandy."

"Heaven pity you for a benighted Southron! Sandy's short for Alexander, ye gomeril."

"I can't very well call you Steve; it would not suit your dour Scots character in the least." Percival levered himself along the plank, making the pots dance and Farquhar clutch for the top of the trestle. The spectators were delighted at the interlude.

"Will ye stop hotchin', ye crawlin' eediot?" said the Scot testily. "Ye dam' near had me off that time! Ca' me what ye like, but dinna ca' me off the plank——"

"The big un's a Heyetalian—can't yer 'ear ther lingo?" said one of the spectators positively.

"Come orf ov it!" said his neighbor derisively. "Don't yer know *frongsay* w'en ye 'ear it? they're Frenchies—bofe ther bofe of 'em."

"The difficulty, my dear Farquhar," said Percival softly, "has been solved by *hoi polloi*; we are French, it appears—I shall call you Étienne."

"Please yoursel'," said the tenacious Farquhar, "but get on wi' the argument. Ye were sayin' if this were an artistic scheme *ad hoc*——"

"Ah, yes. I should agree with you completely if it were, but it isn't—not *ad hoc*."

"No, not *ad hoc,*" grinned Farquhar, "but it is *in capite.* I know the back end of the dictionary as well as any one."

"You're wrong, my lad, quite wrong," insisted Percival, ignoring the thrust. *"In capite* it is a scheme for boost. Anything, therefore, which will catch the public eye is not only legitimate but praiseworthy. Where do we arrive, then?" he asked, with a sweeping gesture that shook the plank.

"We arrive wi' a ding on the pavement if you're no' careful," said Farquhar shortly.

"Pray forget your adipose carcass for one moment—I wish to appeal to your mind——"

"If we arrive at the pavement suddenly I'm thinking you'll appeal with a more open mind yoursel'."

"Ah, Scottishly subtle! I grasp the connection——"

"I grasp what connection I can between me and this plank, anyway."

"If you'll stop talking like a back-chat comedian we may get on with the discussion. The stenciling would attract people to examine it more closely, perhaps. On the other hand, if we leave plain yellow and green, the passers-by can see all they want from the other side of the street. But—but, I say, they come to examine the stenciling, and it chances that they even consider the exhibited menu. Do you get me?"

"Oh, I get you right enough," the Scot returned. "I suppose if I don't agree you'll keep on blethering till all's blue. Have it your own way. Put up what bonny wee stencil ye like, but get on wi' the pentin', for goodness' sake."

"*You* get along with the painting, my son," said Percival with dignity. "I must descend for the exercise of diplomacy—an art, my dear Étienne, an art for which your gross Scots humor entirely unfits you. The dear Archambaud becomes restive, he nears the point of a fit apoplectic. I must descend and say a few kind, reassuring words to him."

Percival swung lightly from the plank and, scorning the gentler use of the trestle as a means of descent, dropped by his hands from the batten. Released from his weight the plank shot back from the arc it had formed. Farquhar forgot pots and brushes as the jerk unseated him. He grabbed at the nearest trestle, embraced the pinnacle formed by the junction of the legs, scrambled desperately for a foothold with the whole scaffolding in imminent danger of collapse, recovered in miraculous fashion, and resumed painting with the greatest *sang-froid*, his pipe still going.

"Coo! 'E's a movie actor," breathed a delighted youngster. "'E ain't 'alf like Charlie Chaplin!"

"The thin one's like Douglas Fairbanks—see the way 'e dropped from the plank? Bet 'e can swing back agin wivout touchin' nothink," yelled another.

Percival approached Monsieur Laverdet, who received him with frigid dignity.

"*A la bonne heure, cher Archambaud,*" said Percival lightly. "There is a little matter on which I must consult you——"

"Monsieur Pemblebury," Laverdet said, "too long have I suffer' in silence. You paint my restaurant lemon-yellow, my doors and window emerald-green. I say nothing. Out of friendship for you I grasp the tongue. Now you and your wild friend collect a crowd outside and do the acrobats for their amusement. It is too much. It is the last straw that gives the camel the hump. I finish. You understand?—I finish!"

"Finish what, my dear Laverdet?" asked Percival, to gain time.

"I finish with the whole nonsense of boosting L'Escargot d'Or. Before I was merely unhappy, now I am miserable. I am in despair. I can not think what will happen the minute after next. It approaches the hour of *déjeuner* and my few customers soon arrive. Do you think they will come here if there is a crowd and people throwing paint about?"

"Why, now, now! A few days ago you were bemoaning the fact that so few people saw the restaurant. Now, when you have a crowd gazing at it, you object. Consistency, my dear Archambaud, is desirable in both men and puddings; if you

object now, you become like the lumpy pudding—inconsistent."

"I do not make lumpy puddings."

"No, of course you don't," Percival said soothingly. "The puddings and creams of L'Escargot d'Or are always consistent. It is lumpiness of mind that irks me——"

"*Hein*—the puddings——"

"Now, for goodness' sake get puddings out of your mind. Events crowd too much on the heels of one another to permit the discussion of such banal things as puddings. That is your side of the job, and you can not expect me to bother myself with what, after all, is your affair. I'll admit the importance of puddings to you, and I recognize that you should be commended for thinking of them, but at the moment the question of stenciling is uppermost in my mind."

"*Ah, le poncis pour le dessin?*"

"Exactly," said Percival quickly. "You have to convince me that a design in which golden *escargots* merrily chew at green leaves should occupy the pilasters which are now plain yellow. I know you are against these plain spaces of lemon-yellow, but do you really think that a stenciled design is going to be of value in the *tout ensemble?*"

Monsieur Laverdet furrowed his brows in perplexity.

"I think it would have an effect," he said slowly, as if he had really thought it out. "I think the yellow spaces too *éclatant,* too crude, do you say?"

"Then, my good friend," Percival said with an air of reluctant admission, "the stenciled design will be carried out. No, not another word, I beg. I am convinced you are right. Now, go inside and don't worry. The trestles will be removed in ten minutes, and nothing will bar the advent of your customers. By eleven o'clock to-morrow the whole task will be completed."

And Percival shepherded the bewildered man into the restaurant.

IV

At eleven o'clock on a bright morning Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet issued pompously from the restaurant and crossed the street, followed by a procession of two—Pemblebury and Farquhar. On the opposite pavement he turned and scanned L'Escargot d'Or. His eye took in the suspended golden snail from the hands of Farquhar. It shone brightly in the sun. Along the lintel of the broad window, in clean, neat letters of emerald-green, the name "L'ESCARGOT D'OR" had been imprinted by the bold hand of the Scot. With ready Gallic emotion he saw his own name emblazoned in small golden letters.

With delight he remarked the delicate designs in which golden snails clung to curling leaves of emerald-green.

Percival was wise enough to be silent when silence was needful, and Farquhar had the Scot's habit anyhow. So the effect had a chance to sink in.

"I feel," said Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet at last, "I feel that a new era has arrived in the fortunes of myself, *mes amis*. Come with me."

He led the way to the restaurant and produced a gold-capped bottle.

"My friends," he said, "we drink—*n'est-ce pas?*—to the fortunes of L'Escargot d'Or." He paused impressively.

"But I think, regard it well, I think, without flattery to myself, that the idea of the stenciling was a stroke of genius."

THE FISH-WIFE

(With a prayer that certain poor bones that lie "under the wide and starry sky" may still rest undisturbed.)

OH, I wad like tae ken, quoth the auld fish-wife, quo' she,
Why partans taste sae fine whan they're fresh frae oot the sea,
While deer's meat's teuch whan new, an' sae tender when it's high?
Aye—ye'd better speir again, tae the auld fish-wife says I.

Oh, I wad like tae ken, quoth the auld fish-wife, quo' she,
Why silo smells sae ill, whan the new-made hay can be
Sae fragrant? Why the first's preferrit b' the kye?
Ach—ye'd better ask anither, tae the auld fish-wife says I.

Oh, I wad like tae ken, quoth the auld fish-wife, quo' she,
Hoo it never is your ain, but some ither's weird ye dree,
An' why stolen fruit is sweeter than the grossets that ye buy?
Ye maun try me wi' anither, tae the auld fish-wife says I.

Oh, I wad like tae ken, quoth the auld fish-wife, quo' she,
If there's onything in nature that thae artist fowk can see

What is no' drawn wi' a straight-edge, like the join o' sea an' sky?
That's a gey mysteer'ous quastion, tae the ould fish-wife says I.

O, I wad like tae ken, quoth the auld fish-wife, quo' she,
Hoo 'tis the English thole the Scots at top o' ilka tree,
Whether Kirk or State, or business, or doon Fleet Street that they spy?
No' tae mention Jews and Welshmen!—tae the auld fish-wife says I.

Oh, I wad like tae ken, quoth the auld fish-wife, quo' she,
Hoo buiks, sae hard tae write, at the sellin' gang agee—
An' hoo writin' bodies live ava?
At that wi' angry cry,
Wull ye haud your tongue, ye besom! tae the auld fish-wife says I.

From "The Parodies of Percival"

CHAPTER VI

THE COMPLETE WAITER

If you can wait, and not be tired of waiting . . .
KIPLING

I

THE morning of Wednesday rose bright and clear. Not so Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet. As he dressed he felt far from bright, and through breakfast his ideas on any subject remained anything but clear, for they were muddled up by vague apprehensions. He felt he had committed himself unwarrantably to a dangerous course of action. He could imagine only the most dire effects from the campaign for the boost of the Golden Snail to be initiated that day by Mr. Percival Pemblebury.

The preliminaries to the campaign had kept Monsieur Laverdet for too prolonged a time in a state of suppressed excitement and thwarted curiosity, and he was suffering the aftermath of strong emotions. He was not altogether sure, this morning, that the repainting of the exterior of the restaurant—over which only recently he had been

enthusiastic enough to crack a gold-topped bottle—had not been a mistake. He opened the front door of his establishment and crossed the street.

There was no mistaking the joyousness of the decoration of the restaurant front. It was rather too joyous, he felt. He would have preferred something quieter—something in grained browns to suggest rich woods. It was distinguished, he admitted, this scheme of lemon-yellow and emerald-green. In spite of its flamboyance it somehow achieved a dignity—yes, a dignity. But it did not seem to suggest the delicate and justly cooked dishes, combining just the right solidity with elegance, by which he hoped to acquire and retain a sober and moneyed *clientèle.* It did not suggest grave waiters in attendance inside, suave ministers to the known tastes of regular customers. It suggested, rather, short-skirted maidens flippantly serving ephemeral and meretricious viands to chance passers-by. For a moment Archambaud thought so, then his eye caught the dignified lettering by which the name of the restaurant was set forth, the gilded snails among the bright green leaves, these gasteropods by which, symbolically, the name was reiterated, and the gold lettering so distinct but so chaste which announced his proprietorship. And a faint glow came up once again in the heart of Archambaud. Yes, it had dignity. It was *panaché*—but it had dignity. It was amazingly im-

pudent—but it had dignity. It was leagues removed from the common and so far was perhaps better than imitated woods. It was so gay that it almost made one smile—made one smile——

Monsieur Laverdet was in the act of smiling when a taxi drove into the street. It contained Percival Pemblebury, spruce and debonair as usual, but it also contained a number of bulky objects, covered over with paper. Monsieur Laverdet's smile disappeared. His jaw dropped in a sudden resurgence of apprehension. He returned a feeble greeting to the wave of Percival's chamois-gloved hand and hurriedly recrossed the street.

"Ah, good morning, my dear Archambaud," said Percival airily. "A perfectly lovely morning, don't you think?—and ideal for the start of our campaign? The clouds still seem to hang about you, my friend—but, courage—we shall soon be in the thick of it! The approach of zero hour is always uncomfortable. Just bear a hand with these pictures—do you mind?"

By this time the imperturbable Percival had descended from the cab and was depositing his packages against the door-jamb of the restaurant. Laverdet smiled wanly, and began to help in taking the pictures from the cab. Percival paid the driver, and the cab drove off. Without a word Laverdet helped to take the pictures into the restaurant, and then his suppressed emotions found utterance.

"Pictures!" he ejaculated.

"Pictures," Percival repeated with satisfaction, "and all by that remarkable painter, Master Percival Pemblebury. Not too few, not too many. Just the right number. The *quantum suff.*"

"And you propose, monsieur——?" Laverdet asked in a tone he hoped suggested ice.

"Quite right, my dear Archambaud," Percival said easily. "I propose to lend distinction to the interior of L'Escargot d'Or by hanging them on the walls."

"Then I protest!" said Laverdet warmly. "This is too much. Not only do you paint the exterior of the restaurant like a card of greeting for the Noël, but you now want to turn L'Escargot d'Or into a picture-gallery. It would be my ruin."

"It seems to me," Percival replied calmly, "that an odd picture or two can't hasten your ruin much. Quite the contrary, I should imagine. They are perfectly good pictures, these, specially selected for the purpose. This——"

The artist stooped and picked up a picture which he held up advantageously to the light.

"This is a very celebrated work," he said. "It has been rejected by all the most famous exhibitions—or the most old-fashioned—in London and Paris."

"I believe you," nodded Laverdet.

"You well may," returned Percival. "Why, this

picture has more of the homing instinct than all the pigeons in Europe together. It has a very retiring nature, I assure you. And such a bright little thing too! With the others it should brighten up the gilt on L'Escargot most wonderfully. Leave this to me. As I lay on my pallet of straw last night I selected the very best positions possible for these little gems of the painting art. I know where they should go exactly to an inch."

Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet saw it was hopeless to argue. He shrugged his shoulders despairingly.

"*Eh bien,*" he said, "have it your own way; at least it will stop you talking."

"Nothing can stop me talking," said Percival cheerfully. "I am a born prattler. But, bless you, on the whole, I find people like it; there is nothing like the innocent chatter of a simple soul for bucking people up."

He picked up a picture and held it out for Laverdet's inspection.

"This," he said, "aspires to delineate a street in old Madrid. Observe the ease with which the artist has caught the fading sunlight—one can almost feel the last heat rising in a haze from the baked soil. Regard the masterly impression of atmosphere. My coalman was pleased to express his august approval of this work the other morning. I had just paid him

a long-outstanding bill, it is true, but I think he was sincere. He said it reminded him of Birmingham!"

Percival began to hang the pictures, and as he worked he kept up a running commentary.

"You will have observed that all these celebrated works portray scenes in old Spain, and no doubt you ask me why this selection——"

"I ask nothing," said Laverdet sourly. "If you hang pictures at all it does not matter much what they portray."

"Pardon me. If you do not ask the question aloud you are naturally curious now the question has been propounded. You do not realize that you are very curious, but you are, I assure you."

"Eh bien," said Laverdet, without a tinge of interest in his voice, "what follows then?"

"It follows that my kind and generous heart must satisfy your gnawing curiosity. You do not know that the finest variety of edible snails comes from Spain?"

"No, I don't know that they do." Laverdet brightened a trifle. "Do they?"

"On that point I am as ignorant as you are," said Percival calmly. "Perhaps they do, perhaps they don't. In any case the doubt is sufficient to justify hanging Spanish pictures in L'Escargot d'Or."

Monsieur Laverdet allowed his jaw to drop on his lower chin. He gazed at the artist in bewilderment.

"So, we hang *Old Madrid* between the mirrors—thus," Percival went on. "*Moonlight on the Guadalquivir* finds a resting place beside the window, the better to show off its somewhat obscure charms—thank heaven for a picture-rail; *Catalonian Muleteers* pose gracefully under the gas-bracket—pardon, electrolier, I believe, is more correct; and the *Public Letter-writer* appropriately enough goes beside the desk, so."

He turned to Laverdet.

"Now, my friend, what do you think of that?"

"They are indeed beautiful."

"Ah, I am glad you can appreciate painting which the few best critics pronounce masterly."

"I allude to the frames," said Laverdet quite seriously. "See how they catch the light. I always said that gold is effective in a restaurant."

"You have mistaken your vocation, *mon vieux*. The *mont de piété* is much more your *métier*. Pawnbrokers, I find, are always taken by the glitter of a picture-frame rather than by the sterling worth of the painting."

"Yes? Meanwhile what of forks and spoons?"

"The forks and spoons, good my master? You simply radiate with intelligence, I admit, but frankly I do not grasp your meaning."

"You really intend to go on with the farce of being waiter?"

"You put it unkindly, but such is my intention."

"The forks and spoons, then, need cleaning," said Laverdet, with a touch of asperity. "If you have finished making L'Escargot d'Or into a small edition of the Luxembourg, perhaps you will give some attention to the forks and spoons."

"Et après?"

"Et après, you start to arrange the tables for *déjeuner*—we open at noon."

"Behold in me the perfect little arranger of tables for *déjeuner!"* said the cheerful Pemblebury. "Lead the way to the forks and spoons—eke to the cruets, good my master. Never has the Golden Snail shone with such luster as it will to-day."

"Let us hope so, at least," grunted Laverdet pessimistically.

He piloted Percival to the back premises of the restaurant. He showed the artist where the linen was kept, and the cutlery. He handed out the polishing materials and left Percival to his task.

II

"The great thing in these polishing bouts," said Percival half an hour later, "is to attack the object in view systematically. First, you apply the lotion to all the articles in the manner directed on the bottle. Second, you start over again from the beginning and

remove the dry deposit with a clean duster. The result is a brilliant polish, dazzling to the eye and satisfying the most scrupulous examination. The pity is that such brilliance is soon to be dimmed by immersion in *crème de la reine* or *tripes à la mode.*"

"You are in high spirits now," said the doleful Laverdet, "but wait until the customers arrive and you have to carry five plates of *potage* together; you will laugh then, perhaps."

"Let them come in their hundreds," Percival said airily; "they can not fluster Aristide, the celebrated *garçon* of L'Escargot d'Or. Serene, calm, imperturbable, Aristide Pembleville remains master of the situation."

"Ah, we shall see!"

"We shall indeed see—and we shall be astonished, I promise you. Now for the tables——"

Percival threw himself into bustling activity, and when Laverdet came up from the kitchen it was to find the restaurant completely prepared for the reception of customers. The tables were neatly set—every spoon, fork, knife, in its proper place and sequence. In addition, the table-napkins were folded in all the odd shapes beloved of the caterer.

Laverdet gasped.

"But, *mon ami, c'est épatant!* There is an air of distinction—an astonishing—and the serviettes too—how is that you know how to fold them?"

"Let me see now," mused Percival. "It must be over twenty years, man and boy, since I first studied the art——"

"Twenty years? You were a child then!"

"Exactly. I practised then with squares of paper—in the kindergarten I frequented."

"Open the door, my friend. It approaches midday. Nothing now remains but for customers to walk in. Remember! I now have confidence in you. Madame is so upset of the nerves that in her anxiety she almost makes hash of the mayonnaise. She weeps. I go to console her with these news. Above all, do not neglect threepence for *couvert* in the *additions à la carte!*"

"The threepence for *couvert* is as the delight of my soul," Percival reassured him. "*Courage! Tout vient à point à qui sait attendre*—in other words, the good waiter misses nothing."

Twelve o'clock came, but no customers crossed the threshold of L'Escargot d'Or. One man gazed over the lace curtains of the window and put Percival into a state of suppressed excitement, but the stranger merely corrected his watch by the clock inside and went on his way.

Monsieur Laverdet viewed with complacency the handiwork of Percival. He might not know much about pictures, but he flattered himself he knew very well the setting out of a restaurant.

"*Mon ami,*" he said graciously, "you are an astonishment to me. The restaurant is a picture for the aching eyes. And your pictures, too—they give an air of richness to the scene. It is of a wonderful correctness. It is perfection. And one touch more would spoil the impression."

"Another touch," agreed Percival, "would be absolutely fatal."

As they gazed about them with so much satisfaction a taxi drew up outside, and both men went quickly to the window, anticipating a customer. But it was merely Farquhar, the Scots sculptor, staggering under a number of bulky packages wrapped in cloth. The battered hat of the Scot appeared round the doorway.

"Man Percy," said the new arrival, "it struck me that the interior was a trifle bare, and I've just brought a statuette or so of mine to brighten up the place."

III

The air in the restaurant of L'Escargot d'Or became decidedly electric. Laverdet, in a state of barely suppressed excitement, divided his time between rushing into the kitchen and coming back into the *salon.*

Everything was prepared. Farquhar's statuettes were distributed about the tables. The pictures by

Percival Pemblebury hung upon the walls, and Percival himself was decked out in his dress clothes—fresh from repose under the sign of the three gilt globes—ready to receive the customers.

About half-past twelve Laverdet came out of the kitchen to find his new waiter peering through the window curtains. Percival waved his hand behind him without turning and Laverdet, properly construing this into a sign for caution, tiptoed to the window.

"S-s-sh!" hissed Percival.

"Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça?"

"Sh! He's smelling the bait! Now he's nibbling!"

"Who is nibbling?"

"A customer. He's a shy fish—very shy—but he's almost hooked."

Laverdet peered through the curtains.

"Flut!" he remarked. "It is only Monsieur Macpherson. He always examines the *carte* before he enters. He is *écossais.*"

"The precaution would denote as much," said Percival. "L'Escargot d'Or seems to attract the hardy Scot. First Farquhar—then this."

"Hullo, Mishew Laverdet! Fine day!" said Mr. Macpherson, entering.

"Bon jour, monsieur."

Mr. Macpherson walked straight to a seat and

sat down. He was startlingly direct in speech and action. Seated, he turned a straight gaze on Percival.

"Hullo!" he said to Laverdet loudly. "You've got a new waiter. What's happened to Alphonse?"

"Gone, monsieur."

Mr. Macpherson let an appraising eye run over Percival.

"This one's cleaner, anyway—that's something," he said.

"Monsieur is too good," murmured Percival, and handed the *carte*.

"Oho! *Par-r-lez-vous frawnçay?*"

"Mais oui, monsieur," said Percival, ready to prattle French with any one.

"Aweel," Macpherson said, "Ah'll jist ha'e the lunch at three and six, see?"

"Bien, monsieur. Hors d'œuvre ou potage?"

"Ah'll ha'e *hors d'œuvre*—they're mair satisfyin' than *potage*."

"C'est bien dit, monsieur."

"Look here, ma man, when Ah said, *'Par-r-lez-vous frawnçay?'* it was jist casual-like. Ah didnae ask for an exheebeetion o't. Scots is good enough for me."

"At twelve and six a bottle, monsieur?"

"Eh, what? Oh, aye—dod, ye're the boy! Ye gey near made me laugh. Come on wi' thae *hors d'œuvre* now, and stop your daffin'."

"One moment," said Percival, and hastened off to the servery in a highly professional glide, leaving Macpherson wry-faced and shaking his head as if to dislodge some foreign object from his ear. This, explained, means that Macpherson was in a state of merriment.

Percival poised spoon and fork over the tray of *hors d'œuvre.*

"Shall I serve monsieur?"

"No, no. Let the tray bide. Ah'll help masel'."

"Let me entreat monsieur to temper generosity with justice."

Macpherson looked grimly at Percival—"glowered," he himself would have called the expression—from under bushy eyebrows, but Percival's face gave no sign of a tremor, nor indicated conscious impertinence.

"Leave that to me, ma man," said Macpherson. "Ah'll ha'e ma fair whack—if that's what ye mean. Oh, by the by, what dae they ca' you?"

"Aristide, monsieur."

"Of?"

"Of, monsieur?—oh, yes—*de tout le monde,* monsieur."

"Aweel, if your brain's as wide as your country ye'll dae fine, Ah'm thinkin'. Run awa', laddie—Ah'm gaun tae be busy. Bring me a herrin' when ye come back."

"Very good, monsieur," said Percival, and glided off to give the order.

"Wonderful man, old Mac," he mused. "Knows his own mind more than a trifle—hullo, another influx!"

A large lady, hot and elderly, with a slim and cool girl sailed into the restaurant. Intent on performing properly, Percival hardly looked at them while he ushered them to select seats as if conferring upon them priceless gifts. He flicked both chairs and the table with his serviette after the manner of the best waiters and presented the *carte* with the faintest suspicion of a bow.

"What have you?" the large lady demanded fiercely. She looked irritable.

Percival allowed a cool gaze to rest upon her. He permitted himself to smile.

"We have a large range, madame," he said. "Either *à la carte* or the fixed *déjeuner* at an equally determined price—three and sixpence for four courses. Let me recommend that madame lunch *à la carte*. The fixed *déjeuner* is so cramping to the style."

"I'm sure I don't know what to have," sighed the large lady, a trifle flustered under the cool gaze, but decidedly less irritable.

"May I suggest *hors d'œuvre* for madame, *potage bonne fermière* for mademoiselle?"

"Oh, yes, Aunt, do let's," said the pretty girl. "You know you love *hors d'œuvre* and I simply dote on vegetable soup."

"But I like vegetable soup too," pleaded the large lady.

"The supply is unlimited," Percival murmured. "Why not have both? Mademoiselle also will have *hors d'œuvre?*"

"Do let's, Aunt. Then we won't be eating different things at the same time," said the girl.

"Very well, then. That will be two of each, waiter."

"Thank you very much, madame," said Percival gratefully, and slid away.

Mr. Macpherson was pondering a further onslaught on the sardines and considering if it would be justifiable when Percival arrived with the grilled herring in the nick of time.

"I permit myself to whisper in the ear of mademoiselle that the gherkins are ravishing," murmured Percival, as he arranged the dishes.

"Oh, thank you!"

"Will madame order some wine?"

The large lady beamed.

"What would you recommend?"

Percival recommended a *vin de Touraine* as not too heating on such a day. And it suddenly dawned upon him uncomfortably that the custom was to

collect the money before purchasing the wine at a neighboring store. He felt he simply could not do it before the pretty girl. He hurried out and bought the wine from his own pocket.

When he returned he found a new customer in one of the best window seats, a supercilious girl whose pasty face was muddied by a dingy green "art" frock of no shape in particular. Percival hated her at once. Her manners were atrocious to begin with, and she had selected a table set for six.

"Garçong!" said the pasty-faced girl aggressively.

"One moment," said Percival patiently.

He carefully uncorked the bottle and set it in readiness on the table beside the large lady. He cleared away the used plates and went to fetch the soup.

"Garçong!" The voice followed him.

He came quickly back with the soup and heard the penetrating voice of Mr. Macpherson.

"Aristide!"

"Sir?"

"Ah'll ha'e the *tournedos* when ye're passin'."

"Yes, sir."

Percival passed along to the pasty-faced girl.

"Ah," said she, "your name's Aristide, is it? French, aren't you?"

Percival's face became mask-like. "If mademoiselle wishes it, yes." He handed her the *carte*.

The aggressive one settled down to study how best she could obtain her money's worth, and Percival slipped away to attend Macpherson.

"Garçong! Aristide!" This from her of the dingy countenance.

Percival paused to remove the soup-plates from the table of aunt and niece and to pour out the wine. Meanwhile the lady at the window vociferated.

"Voulez-vous me donner des hors d'œuvre, mon ami?" said she laboriously when Percival stood beside her. Her accent could easily have been sawn.

"I don't *voulez* very much, but I will," said Percival, and left her to ponder it. He brought the tray.

"Vous n'avez pas des anchois, Aristide?" the pasty one asked with a pettish disregard of grammar. The pettishness was meant to be fetching.

"Non," said Percival with grave *aplomb, "mais nous avons—l'ardoise de ma tante."*

He turned away and found the slim girl burying her face in her handkerchief, which embarrassed him considerably. He suddenly felt that however insufferable the pasty-faced girl might be, and however familiar in her manner to him, he had been rather too flippant in his repartee—a bit of a cad—and he thought that when the pretty girl with the large lady got over her merriment she would realize just how caddish he had been, and he felt angry with himself. He had been as vulgar as the pasty-faced one herself.

It added to his embarrassment that the face of the pretty girl with the large lady was somehow vaguely familiar to him. She reminded him of—of? And then Percival's heart gave a great leap.

"It can't be!" he whispered to himself. "It would be too much luck!"

He dared not look in the direction of the pretty girl. He was afraid to look. He hurried out of the *salon* and tried to catch a glimpse of her from there, but her back was to him, and her head concealed by a *cloche* hat. But her slim shoulders, he felt almost certain now, he had seen before, had seen last as the young and lovely damsel in distress entered the taxi on the night of the fight. He collected the dishes next on the order of the large lady and sped back. He simply had to look the pretty girl in the face at once.

He reached the table, and she smiled up at him from eyes that still were misty with laughter. Percival felt a thrill run up and down his spine, for these twin pools of violet were unmistakable. It was the girl he had rescued that night. It was Myrtle!

In a half-daze he looked down into the eyes of wood-violet color, and he saw recognition creep into them. Then a rosy flush crept into the fair face. With an effort he snatched himself back to sanity and busied himself with the dishes, skilfully

attracting the attention of the large lady to the food and away from the embarrassment of her niece. He was glad to hear the voice of Mr. Macpherson demanding a coffee.

He roused himself to activity.

When he brought the coffee to Mr. Macpherson he failed to notice that that gentleman was gazing in rapt attention at one of his pictures.

"Wha did this?" demanded Macpherson.

"Wha did wha——" Percival began absently with an imitation of the Scots accent. Then recollecting himself: "I beg your pardon, sir. Who did what, sir?"

"Wha pented this picture?"

"The signature in the corner is that of 'Percival Pemblebury,' monsieur."

"The lad that pented that thing in the War Museum collection—that G.S. wagon in the shell-hole?"

"It may be so, sir—it is very likely—the name is not common," said Percival, still clinging to his *rôle* of waiter.

"The fellow can pent," said Macpherson. "I tak' it he's a youngster?"

"Monsieur Laverdet would inform you, sir."

"I wonder if Laverdet would sell these?" Macpherson murmured, his shaggy brows over his eyes.

"They are for sale, I understand, monsieur," said

Percival, his already quickly beating heart going faster still.

"Trot him up here, then, an' we'll see."

Percival slid to the kitchen and collared Laverdet. He put a price on the pictures below which Laverdet was not to descend, and gave another from which to start the bargaining. Laverdet conducted the Scot round the pictures and into the back premises.

Fresh customers had arrived in the restaurant, and Percival had enough to occupy his mind and keep him from lapsing into daydreams and speculations regarding the girl he knew as Myrtle. Twice he had to visit her table, and each time he was rewarded by a friendly glance that still warned him not to recognize her openly. Then the stout lady prepared to leave and handed her purse to her niece so that she could pay the bill. The violet eyes were shaded shyly by long dark lashes as slim hands ran over the change, then suddenly they looked frankly into Percival's. Auntie was at the door, waiting.

"There is a shilling with a hole in it," said the girl quietly. "I know you are not really a waiter, so don't regard it as a tip. I hope it brings you luck. Will you take it, please, for the memory of two rotters laid flat on the pavement—and for the sake of your aunt's slate-pencil?"

Percival's fingers closed over the coin. He felt not in the least loquacious.

"You will come back?" he whispered huskily.

"Come, Myrtle!" said the large lady from the doorway impatiently.

A faint nod gave Percival his answer. It might have meant yes—it might simply have meant good-bye.

Laverdet passed him, showing Mr. Macpherson out of the restaurant. The stout Frenchman came back in a state of intense excitement.

"I have Monsieur Macpherson's check for a hundred and eighty guineas, *mon ami,*" he whispered hoarsely. "All six pictures."

But Percival hardly looked at him. He was gazing down at his hands. On the open palm of one lay a pierced shilling. The other held an envelope with a girl's name and address on it. Myrtle had offered him a chance. She had carelessly left an old envelope on the table.

"Myrtle Gililland," Percival was murmuring, as though it were an invocation, "Myrtle Gililland!"

SLOGANEER AND FLOGGER

THIS is an ear-splitting song of the race
That was run by two Boosters,
Done in unending laps,
Each in turn with the lead,
Booming from here to Hong-Kong
Rival firms' "Powders for Roosters."
Slog a shade early perhaps,
But Flog a good second indeed.
Slog had some eggs made of tin,
Dropped them on farms from a 'plane,
Filled with his powder (for nix),
Covered a whole lot of ground.
Flog on the roads made a din
(Fleet of lorries as long as a train)
With roosters performing queer tricks,
Sent up his sales with a bound.
Slog started an egg-laying contest
With several good freeholds as prizes.
Flog soon confessed he was done—till he chanced
On a jolly fine stunt containing some
Corking surprises. (Once more his goods were in front.)
My, but old man Slog danced.
Supposing I had half of the money
They blued on it all—or let's say even one
Of their quarterly bills to the *Mail*—
Imagine how I would laugh
At my tailor. Why, doggone it all,
Yes! My unfortunate dun,
I'd pay even you on the nail!

"Tut-tut Stories," by CUPYARD RIDLING
From "The Parodies of Percival"

CHAPTER VII

THE POWER OF THE PRESS

Vox populi, vox Dei—pu-shaw!
HALL CAINE

I

"CURIOSITY," said Percival Pemblebury in his most sententious manner, "curiosity, in addition to leading the feline species to death, is one of the chief driving forces for the indolent and semi-indolent human."

Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet grunted absently.

"Then you don't agree with me?" Percival went on. "How do you account, then, for the newspapers being so full of apparently useless chatter?"

Again Laverdet grunted.

The pair were surrounded by a litter of evening papers, and not a single one of these but mentioned Percival's sudden desertion of Art for the napkin of the waiter. The more conservative had given paragraphs which avoided mention of L'Escargot d'Or, but others had devoted to the news quarter-

and half-columns which blazoned forth the name of the restaurant. Percival had to acknowledge that his friend Farquhar had done great work for the boost of the Golden Snail.

Ignoring Percival's question with complete self-absorption Laverdet began to read aloud for about the twentieth time the longest of the articles. He raised his voice pompously whenever the name of his establishment occurred. And Percival was moved to protest.

"If, *mon cher* Archambaud," he said, "if you are learning those literary efforts by rote to recite at some musical evening I have not a word to say. I shall suffer in silence. But, personally, I should recommend *Lasca,* or perhaps a trifle of Kipling as being more popular."

"*Hein?*" asked Laverdet absently.

"Or, if you would prefer something with the personal touch, I am prepared to write you an engaging ballad which I should entitle *The Poisoned Pêche Melba, or The Restaurateur's Remorse!*"

"Again——?" said Laverdet.

"I was remarking that while curiosity was the chief driving force for cats and indolent humans—a pearl of wisdom, my dear Laverdet, which you entirely missed in its more amplified form—there is still another factor in the situation. You talk of doubling your supplies for to-night's *dîner,* but you

are much too previous. You make no allowance for conservatism——"

"What is he—conservatism? I thought he was a politics?"

"The conservatism, the prudence, of the average Londoner. Besides," added Percival, with an elision which bewildered Laverdet, already quite at sea, "you do not give time to Rumor."

"No?"

"No. You must allow time for Rumor to do her deadly work. She moves quickly, but not quickly enough for more than, say, a dozen extra lunches to-morrow."

The countenance of Laverdet lost its round contentment. "You English!" he exclaimed. "You are like ice! You arrange the most amazing *potin—furore*—and you calmly sit up and make fun of the thing you have done! Don't you think the curious will come this evening?"

"Leaving aside your limited view of my nationality for a moment," said Percival—"a very contentious statement, mind you—I will make a prophecy. One man will come——"

Laverdet's mouth described an O.

"He will be an adenoidous person," Percival went on, "the sort of parishioner who can not pass a hole in the road or a fallen horse. An open-mouthed, gaping specimen——"

"A friend of yours?"

"No. Possibly, or rather probably, I have never seen him before."

"Boots of my sainted grandmother!" breathed Laverdet. "Then how do you know he will come?"

Percival waggled a portentous finger.

"I draw upon my wide knowledge of human nature," he said.

"Oh, that!" said Laverdet, unintentionally contemptuous. *"Eh bien,"* he went on, after a pause, "it shall be as you say with regard to the *dîner*. I give way to my partner's opinion."

Percival sat up.

"How do you mean, 'partner'?" he asked.

Laverdet spread eloquent fingers.

"Ah, my good friend," he said emotionally, "first you lend me one hundred and forty pounds, and then you insist that I keep the check of Monsieur Macpherson for one hundred and eighty-nine pounds, proceeds of selling your pictures to him. That is a good something, but it is not all. You devote yourself to the good of L'Escargot d'Or—you infect me with your enthusiasm, your *élan*." Monsieur Laverdet's emotion ran away with his English. "If now the restaurant succeed it will be you who has did it! *Alors,* you take a third of the profit—as partner asleep—when you stop the foolishness of waiter."

"But, my dear Archambaud——"

"That will do, my ver' good friend! There is no more to say on the subject. It is finish'!"

And the good Laverdet put up a pudgy hand with an air of finality.

Percival eyed him quietly for a moment, rather at a loss for the right thing to say. Out of respect for his friend's evident elation he wanted to be careful.

"Very well, my dear Laverdet," he said, "I accept very gratefully, and I shall do my best to deserve your confidence. Shall we shake hands on the bargain?"

Laverdet seized the outstretched hand and wrung it fervently. Then the partners sealed the compact with the contents of a gold-capped bottle.

At this fortunate moment Farquhar, that competent Scot, turned up.

"Hullo, Percival! Afternoon, Laverdet!" said he. "I've been burnin' daylight in the journalistic taverns and coffee-shops. You'll have a bonny show in to-morrow's dailies. Fe'th! But they're a drouthy crew, thae pen-shovin' lads frae ayont the Tweed!"

He broke off as his eye was caught by the bottle and glasses.

"Ohe! *Ave!*—or in the ruder tongue—cheerio! The 'Boy' no less!"

"Have some?" asked Percival.

"I could do with a sensation," Farquhar admitted; "in a mug for preference. What's the celebration this time?"

"We celebrate the acceptance by Monsieur Pemblebury of a partnership in the restaurant of L'Escargot d'Or," said Laverdet importantly.

"There's an apostasy!" said the polite Farquhar.

"Anyhow, here's amazing luck to the venture!"

Farquhar buried his nose in the tankard which Percival had brought him filled with wine. Laverdet's eyes widened as he watched the tankard tilt upward steadily.

"You would have been an acquisition in the trenches in 1915, Farquhar," said Percival.

"How do you mean?" asked the Scot, setting down the empty vessel.

"As a suction pump!"

"The apparatus only works on beer and bubbly. As it was, once in a communication trench I fell—woof. What did ye mind me o't for? Well," Farquhar broke off, "I'm away down to Chelsea to round up the lads and lassies. I'm going to dash about in a taxi—and hang the expense—an' I'm going to send every mother's son to the Golden Snail the night. It'll be a hectic evening, so look out for squalls!"

"Good Lord!" gasped Percival. "Look here, old man, we're hardly prepared for invasion——"

"That's up to you, my birkie! Ye've made your bed—ye can lie on't!"

And Farquhar rammed his rusty old hat on his head, braced back his great shoulders and made for the door.

"Stop!" yelled Percival.

"Not me!" Farquhar roared back. "Lay in a big stock of *vang ordinair-r-re!* I'm thinkin' you'll be needin' it!"

Next instant the big Scot was gone.

Percival turned with a blank face to Laverdet.

"Now, what do you think of that, *mon ami?*" he asked.

"I think we had better get busy, my old one," Laverdet replied. "I go to do some extra shopping."

"But I know all these people. They'll chaff my life out!"

"What does it matter?" asked Laverdet with a twinkle, and he quoted Percival: " 'Serene, imperturbable, Aristide, the celebrated *garçon* of L'Escargot d'Or remains master of the situation.' "

"Why, so he does!" said Percival. "Let 'em all come!"

They did.

II

They came in a procession of taxi-cabs, with Stephen Farquhar as Master of the Pageant. Six

taxi-cabs, gaily beflagged and decorated, with a baker's half-dozen apiece in the way of passengers, sailed perilously along the King's Road, up Sloane Street, along Knightsbridge and Piccadilly into Soho. Grinning policemen on point duty held up the traffic to let the procession pass unbroken and were cheered for their good humor.

Laverdet, in a state of excited importance, received the hordes. He did not know whether to laugh or cry, but laughter won in the end. The restaurant was packed, and little boys and loafers glued their faces to the windows, trying vainly to see what was going on inside. Some of the bolder spirits kicked at the doors until a handy policeman came along and moved the crowd.

Inside, Percival went about with a mask-like face which contained no recognition for any one. It suited his humor to adopt a broken accent, to be "Aristide," the calm and serene *garçon*. And the crowd of artists fell in with his mood. Those who had the gift of tongues insisted on speaking French to him, and the remainder did what mangling they could.

Alphonse, the quondam waiter of L'Escargot d'Or, turned up in the nick of time—in response to a message from Laverdet—and bore a hand.

"Thick or clear?" asked Percival at one table.

"Both!" said a wit.

"Thick and clear for m'sieu'," said Percival calmly. "And for madame?"

"Mixed," said the lady.

"Mixed soup for madame," noted Percival.

He brought two tureens.

"It will be a convenience if the lady and gentleman will help themselves. They will have noticed that we are ver' busy *ce soir!*"

"Garçon!"

"M'sieu'?"

"Y-a-t-il des soles à la bonne reine?"

"M'sieu', je suis désolé—you see, it is the birthday of the Prince de Galles——"

"What has that to do with it?"

"His Majesty has ask' Monsieur Laverdet to allow the *chef* for the soles to go to the Palace and cook heem the *soles bonne reine.* It is unfortunate," Percival shrugged his shoulders, "but if monsieur would like a nice grill' herring——"

"It goes very well, a grilled herring."

"Merci, monsieur!"

At some tables, for sheer devilment, they tried to hold him up by unnecessary consultation over the choice of dishes. Percival had a short way with him. He told them to thrash out the question in their own good time, and proceeded to another group.

Given a good will in the matter it is quite easy to become excited with even *vin ordinaire.* As the

dinner proceeded the crowd grew more and more merry. One gentleman's demand for champagne was immediately squashed as "swank." What was good enough for the crowd was good enough for anybody, declared Farquhar, prime mover in the squashing.

For a while Monsieur Laverdet had presided over the gathering, but the pace grew too hot for madame in the kitchen, and he had to descend to her assistance. He missed the most of Percival's performance, but he had seen enough to convince him that L'Escargot d'Or never had a better waiter. He declared his conviction to madame.

"*Flut!*" said that lady. "You are infatuated with that Monsieur Pemblebury. I do not think too much of the people he has brought. They are too noisy to be respectable."

"It is only for once," pleaded Laverdet. "It is a special occasion. It will give the restaurant advertisement. Regard it well, *ma mie,*" he said with a solemn nod, "there is nothing like advertisement."

"I hope you are right," said his wife doubtfully, "but I do not see myself out of the kitchen and at the cash-desk quite at once. Oh, la-la!" she broke off, "what a demand there is for that new *crème printemps!*"

"It is new. It is popular," her husband said. "Presently I shall perfect it, that discovery of Mon-

sieur Pemblebury. It will become famous with L'Escargot d'Or."

Laverdet was brewing coffee as fast as he could, and presently there came from above the sound of rapping on the tables. Laverdet recognized the sound.

"Some one goes to make a speech," he said excitedly. "Come, *ma chérie,* you shall stand at the top of the stairs and listen!"

He hurriedly put on his coat and ran up the stairs. When he arrived in the dining-room Farquhar was on his feet.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the Scot began, "as the poet has truly said, *Nunc est bibendum*—and I'll have you know, just in passing, and in parenthesis, as it were, that these wise words constitute the motto of the Farquhars—meaning, I will here interpose for the benefit of the unlearned, 'Never refuse to drink.' The man—or woman—who refuses to drink the toast I am about to propose, of him—or her—I can only say that he—or she—is unworthy to sit here in this select, though not too well-washed, gathering."

Murmurs rose from the audience. Farquhar held up a huge hand.

"It has been our privilege," he went on, "to witness to-night a change of character that makes old man Proteus look like a performer at a Sunday school bun-fight. (Who Proteus was, if he ever

was, I have not the faintest idea, but, no, Lottie, he was not the inventor of a patent food!) We have seen a justly celebrated artist———"

("Hear! Hear!")

"—a justly celebrated artist discard the profession to which he was an ornament and assume with a dexterity and *insouciance*——" ("Not to mention *sang-froid,*" some one suggested) "—not to mention *sang-froid,* altogether amazing, the much more skilled profession of waiter." ("Hear! Hear!") "Why he should choose to indulge in this—this—shall I say manœuver——"

"Why not?" asked some one. "It's a very good word, and an easy one to spell."

"This manœuver, then," Farquhar went on—"he himself knows, but this I will say for him: he has provided us with an entertainment we've sorely needed for a while back."

"For a what?" some one asked. Farquhar ignored the interruption.

"It's up to us, therefore, to drink his health and wish him prosperity. And when we do that let us not forget that his prosperity is bound with that of Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet, and that while we drink to them both we must remember that we wish great good luck to this bonny wee *auberge,* L'Escargot d'Or!"

The audience rose to acclaim the toast, but Farquhar held up his great paw once more.

"Bide a wee—bide a wee!" he said. "This is only preliminary. The night's young, and here we can only do the honors in *vin ordinaire*. But doon in ma wee bit bothy in Chelsea is a fine new case o' whisky frae Scotland." (Loud cheers.) "We canna tak the restaurant with us, but we can and will tak' Pemblebury and Laverdet. I only ask that you'll gi'e me the first taxi for them and me, since it's me that has the key. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the toast of Laverdet, Pemblebury and the Golden Snail!"

The acclamation was enthusiastic, but not prolonged. A case of whisky lay unbroached at Chelsea. The crowd collected the willing Percival and, in spite of his protests, the hesitant Laverdet. A taxi was found for Farquhar and his charges, they were shot into it, and cheered to the echo as they sailed away. The pavement in front of the restaurant cleared, and Alphonse fell to his old task of putting up the shutters. Inside, madame counted the takings and vaguely hoped that her husband would not be killed. It would be a nuisance if he were. In that event she would have to do the marketing in the morning.

III

Spruce, well shaved, smiling and debonair, Percival Pemblebury on the following morning stepped into the restaurant of L'Escargot d'Or. His old

gray suit was beautifully pressed, his hat was set at a slight but jaunty angle on his trim head, and in his buttonhole was a pink carnation. His hand, covered by a pale yellow glove of chamois, held a slim cane with a bright silver top. He looked—and he felt—fresh and clean.

Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet looked dull—and felt dull. His head was still buzzing from the effects of Farquhar's whisky, a beverage which did not suit his constitution in the least. The sight of Percival, so joyous and full of life, merely gave Laverdet an increase of irritation. He felt insulted that any one should be bright and cheerful when he was in such a condition of misery and remorse.

"Good morning, my dear Archambaud," Percival greeted him. "You do not appear your gay self this fair morning. The happy smile is lacking, the effervescent gaiety. Hast been too much i' the sun?"

"Oh!" groaned Laverdet, with a pudgy hand to his hot brow.

"As bad as that?" asked Percival. "Have you tried cold water in external and internal application?"

"Ouch!" said Laverdet, with some feeling.

"I suppose you refused your morning coffee?"

Laverdet nodded grimly, but with a certain expression of self-pity.

"A mistake, *mon ami.* You should have taken it without milk—just a single cup. As for me, I drank about a gallon of water this morning, and about a quart of tea——"

"Ah, that villain of an *écossais!*" groaned Laverdet. "He has ruined my life. He insisted that I drink his vile spirit. How many did I have, my friend?"

"Oh, not very many," said Percival cheerfully, "perhaps about two dozen——"

"A-h-h! I am poisoned with alcohol. This morning madame does not speak to me—she threatens divorce. At what time did one arrive home this morning?"

"About five o'clock; one came home in a growler, to the driver of which one swore eternal friendship. It was a pathetic scene on the pavement this morning. One wept over one's friend of the growler."

"What is he—a 'growler'?"

"An ancient cab, my friend——"

"And I wept to the *cocher?*"

"You were desolated to leave him, he reminded you so of your sainted father——"

"I can not remember—I can not remember," said Laverdet. "I remember only that I refuse' a third drink from your friend Farquhar; after that is complete oblivion. No wonder madame is annoyed. I can not blame her if she seek a divorce!"

"Come," said Percival, "I shall make your peace with madame, and after that I shall treat you for your headache."

He descended to the kitchen and made his best efforts to be charming. At first madame was adamant in her annoyance, but gradually, under the influence of Percival's sunniest smiles and gaiest banter, she said that perhaps the conduct of her Archambaud was not so unforgivable after all. But she expressed her determination to be very cold with Farquhar. Percival left the middle-aged couple in the midst of an affecting reconciliation, and sauntered out to a chemist's where he was well known, and there he had a formula of his own carefully prepared.

After the dose had been administered to Laverdet the sufferings of that stout Gaul sensibly diminished. He regained a measure of cheerfulness. He became sanguine regarding the future of the restaurant.

"The artist," said Percival, "is a gregarious creature——"

"*Comment?*"

"*Comment* what, my dear Archambaud?"

"*Comment* what you said—greguer——"

"You are not your bright self this morning, my lad," said Percival seriously. "You usually understand an unknown word by the context—but what

would you, if you 'put an enemy into your mouth to steal away your brains'? That's Shakespeare, my dear Archambaud, and you would be well to take the warning to heart; a great poet like our Shakespeare should not spill such pearls of wisdom in vain."

Laverdet put one hand to his brow and held the other out in protest.

"Stop! Stop!" he entreated. "What has the great Shakespeare to do with the customers of my restaurant?"

"Everything and nothing," returned Percival, determined to be cryptic.

"I do not understand you," said Laverdet feebly. "I say that the artists will be the good customers, and you reply that they are a thing I do not know about; then you say some Shakespeare which mean nothing to me. It is too much to expect a man to follow all *bouleversé* with the strong drink of the hardy Scottishmen——"

"Then let me put it more plainly," said Percival gently. "You must not expect too much from the crowd that came last night. They are artists, some of them, and the rest think they are. What would you say was the chief characteristic of the artist?"

Laverdet thought for a moment.

"No money—funny clothes—and a thirst," he said.

"I asked for the chief characteristic," Percival said; "you have given me three. But they will serve. A man or woman who wears funny clothes, as you put it, is not at home except with others of a kind. The same might be said about people with no money and with a large thirst. They find courage to wear their funny clothes, bear their poverty, and assuage their thirst by herding together—they are, in fact, gregarious."

"Ah," said Laverdet, "they go *en troupes*."

"Exactly. You will find the artists gathering together in L'Escargot d'Or. Now, no one can make a fortune out of artists directly—at least, not by means of a restaurant—especially when the artists are only in embryo. As you say, they have no money."

"Then why bring them here?" asked the bewildered Laverdet.

"Because," answered Percival seriously, "though they have no money themselves, they will attract money."

"Ah!" Laverdet exclaimed with a drawn and rising inflection.

"Yes, my dear Archambaud. There is one word which attracts the *bourgeois* almost more than any nowadays, and that is 'Bohemian.' "

"La vie Bohème!" exclaimed Laverdet. "I do not want any of that sort in my restaurant. I want L'Escargot d'Or to be 'igh-class!"

"It shall be high class," said Percival soothingly. "It is merely that, being French, you do not know what 'Bohemian' means."

"What does it mean, then?"

"It depends," said Percival. "Some people think it means sitting on the floor when a chair is quite handy. Others think it is a woman smoking—some imagine it is absinthe. It is a much-abused word, my dear Archambaud—like 'Art'—which nowadays may mean a 'hand-painted' drain-pipe!"

"It is no good, *mon ami,*" said Laverdet, with a touch of despair, "you go too fast for me. I do not understan' half you say."

"Neither do I," Percival said easily, "so that's all right. What I want to convey is that we must get people to come and see the lions feed."

"No!" Laverdet protested firmly. "I do not mind when you paint the restaurant green and yellow, I do not even mind when you bring artists to the restaurant, but I will not have the place a menagerie, I will not have lions in the restaurant!"

"My dear Archambaud," said Percival patiently, "I was speaking figuratively. What I meant to convey to you is that we must attract the people to see the Bohemians feed. You and I know that there are no Bohemians left in London or Paris, but there is much that passes as Bohemianism. We must make people think that L'Escargot d'Or is out of

the common, but we must make sure that the only uncommon thing about it is the uncommonly good food. People will get tired of the quasi-Bohemians, but they will not tire of good eating."

"Ha!" Laverdet said triumphantly, "that is my side of the affair. Already I have secured a *chef,* whom I have known for years to be the best in town. Madame comes up to take the money. I do the marketing and arrange the menus."

"The next thing to do is to raise the prices," said Percival calmly, "which will have the effect of freezing the artists out. We must begin to attract the stage, and with the stage will come the *noblesse* who forget to *obliger;* after them will come the *bourgeoisie* who want to be in the swim. They are the people you want, the people who are afraid *not* to spend money."

Laverdet gave the artist a quick look of intelligence and nodded.

"Now," said Percival, "all we have to do is to set the scheme working. In the meantime, so that I shall have time to machinate, you must find another waiter."

"Ha!" grunted Laverdet, "I thought you soon would tire! It is not the play of a child to wait!"

"On the contrary, I am not tired. It is merely that I am in the position of a general who has been in the front line. I have improved the morale of

the troops. In a day or two I must go back to my real job of conducting the offensive."

"I understand," said Laverdet. "Alphonse will be pleased to come back in permanence, and I shall engage another waiter."

"Right," Percival agreed. "I fancy we shall want him. I say, Laverdet, what would you think if I fetched Kitty Kintore here to lunch?"

Laverdet's eyes gleamed.

"Kitty Kintore is the American actress at the Thespis Theater, is it not?—of whom the journals make great mention every day? It would be our fortune," said he. Then he shrugged his shoulders and added despairingly, "But she will not come."

"Will you bet on that?"

"Do you know her? It may be that she is a friend?"

"No," said Percival, "I have never met her."

"How, then, could you bring her here?"

"That is my affair—will you bet on it?"

"Yes," said Laverdet eagerly, "I will bet you five pounds to one."

"Done, then. That's a bet!"

"It would be a great thing for L'Escargot d'Or if she would come," Laverdet said enthusiastically. "It would then mean that a little notice would go in the journals—'Miss Kintore has discover' a ver' charming restaurant where she goes ver' frequently.

The *cuisine,* I am tol', is of a quality mos' amazing, an' the proprietor, Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet, is of a disposition mos' obliging. It is call' L'Escargot d'Or——' Ah, it would be a fortune!"

"Then that's all right," said Percival. "Consider it done. Now, will you be good enough to lend me a fiver?"

"But certainly." Laverdet dived into his pocket and produced his wallet, from which he extracted five notes. *"Voilà, mon ami,"* he said. "Are you sure it will be enough?"

"Oh, yes," said Percival easily, pocketing the money. "Stand by with a good luncheon when I tell you she is coming."

"It will be a dream of selection and cooking."

"Good. It can not be for a day or two. I must keep on with this job of waiting, or the newspapers will smell a rat, and we'll be spoiled for further publicity."

And in spite of himself Percival sighed.

"My friend," said Laverdet quickly, "you are not so happy as you wish me to think. There is something on your mind."

"My dear Archambaud, there is. There is a great deal on my mind. Do you remember that day when I first suggested the boost of the Golden Snail?"

"Shall I ever forget it?" Laverdet protested.

"A very strange thing happened to me that night,"

said Percival dreamily. "I got into a fight—a street brawl."

"Palsembleu!" said Laverdet.

"It was not much of a fight, either," Percival went on. "Do you remember the lovely girl who came in with the stout lady yesterday?"

"She who left that old envelope over which you were dreaming so often?" Laverdet smiled. "She was ravishingly beautiful."

"Well," said Percival, "that's the girl I'm going to marry one day. On the night of the fight I had to rescue her from—from something rather unpleasant."

"Saperlotte!" cried Laverdet. "You mystify me, my friend. Can not you be more—more explaining?"

"I'll tell you," said Percival. And to his stout friend he related the history of his encounter with Myrtle.

"But—green whiskers of a thousand goblins!" cried Laverdet—"you are eating your heart out because you can not go in search of her. Never, never will I permit you to continue the foolishness of waiter while this mystery remains unsolutioned. I do not care if the restaurant is ruined—you must go immediately and find this beautiful girl. It is your duty, my friend."

"I don't know that she would welcome such an

enterprise on my part," said Percival. "Besides, if there's one thing above another I'd hate myself for it would be to lay down on this job after promising to see it through. The girl herself would despise me if she knew. No, I must keep on waiting at least for another week. Then I shall have three tasks on hand——"

"Three?"

"First, the task of getting Miss Kintore to frequent the Golden Snail——"

"But the girl! Surely she is first?"

"The girl," said Percival sadly, "must wait. When I have secured the custom of Kitty Kintore I shall be free to go in search of Myrtle."

"But the third task, my friend?" said Laverdet.

"It ought to be second, really," said Percival. "It is to find the old lady to whom the lac cabinet belonged."

"Ah, I see. That is very like you, my brave Pemblebury," said Laverdet with some emotion. "I discover within a day or two the secret excellencies of my old customer, and I begin to find him mos' splendid! To think that I dun you for my stupid bill!"

"Pooh!" said Percival. "Perhaps it is as well that you did. There might never have been any boost of the Golden Snail otherwise."

Laverdet's eyes grew round with horror.

"That is true. Heavens!" he cried, "if you had

never run up a bill—or if I had never been unpleasant about it! *Saperlipopette!"*

"But," said Percival, "I am not without hope that she will come before I begin my search. What do you think of that?"

He produced a card from his pocket and handed it to Laverdet. The *restaurateur* saw a neatly lettered announcement that L'Escargot d'Or had been improved and that all old patrons were invited to look in. The lettering was embellished with a clever piece of decoration.

"It is charming," said Laverdet, a trifle doubtfully. "It is for the lovely girl with the stout lady?"

"Of course. I sat down this morning early and drew it for her specially."

"After a party las' night? It is impossible!"

"I assure you I did, my dear Archambaud. You must not think because the ceiling hit you that it hit everybody."

He took an old envelope from his pocket and scanned the address on it. Then with a fountain pen he copied the address on a clean envelope, in which he enclosed the card.

"I almost hope she does not come before I give up this job of waiting," he said. "I'd like to be able to meet her as Percival Pemblebury. But I can not do without seeing her."

Laverdet was watching his young friend with a melancholy interest. He felt very sentimental and romantic indeed.

"Do you know," he said at last, "I think inside myself—with a certainness mos' absolute—that the card will bring the pretty girl to L'Escargot d'Or. For won't she know at once that it is from you? And won't she wish at once to rush to the arms of her brave defender?"

"Tcha!" said Percival. "I must go and put on the somber garb of Aristide."

But, for all his show of indifference, the grip he gave the hand of Archambaud hurt the pudgy fingers considerably.

A HEBREW NIGHT

"JEW boy, Jew boy, where have you been?"
"To the theayter where wonders are seen,
To watch cousin Mo' play a blue-blooded Earl,
And see sister Mir' as a sweet English girl."

"Jew boy, Jew boy, what do you know?"
"That the English are easy wherever I go.
They've given my tribesmen control of their stage
And let schnorrers like Moshey become all the rage."

"Jew boy, Jew boy, why do you sigh?"
"To think of the killing I'll make by and by;
To think of the time when I've got lines to speak,
And know I am making my fifty a week."

"Blighty Nights," by BOMAS TURKE
From "The Parodies of Percival"

CHAPTER VIII

THE CUSP OF INCREASE

Hitch your wagon to a star.

I

IT WAS that chatty weekly, *The Faun,* which afforded Percival a chance to relinquish the garb and occupation of waiter. The journal had a practise of appearing to dispense the absolute last word about any gossip which was exercising the town. It happened that for the issue of the week during which Percival was performing at L'Escargot d'Or the subeditor was short of matter for the columns of spicy bits occupying the first few pages. He cast an eye on the number of contributions Percival had made to this particular week's collection and he bit a severe dent in his penholder. After some painful cerebration and a trifle of mastication he limbered up the exclamation-mark key of his typewriter and evolved the following bright gem of lighter journalism:

It is of course absurd to suggest, as some of our

not too well-informed contemporaries have been doing, that that talented artist, Percival Pemblebury, has been driven into waitership at L'Escargot d'Or by lack of funds! Readers of *The Faun* are too familiar with the brilliant work in black-and-white and color of our Percival to believe that sort of rumor! We do not as a rule pay the smallest prices to our contributors, and a glance over the present issue will show at once how little grounds there are for the idea that the clever Percy just escapes taking the dole!

The escapade, we need hardly say, is the result of a bet! Any one acquainted with Percy is aware that he will bet on any mortal thing—and his intimate friends know to their cost that he has a habit of winning his bets! Rumor hath it that already a certain well-known man about town is ruefully eyeing his empty note-case, while the engaging Percy is slapping a full one! But—though we are "in the know"—wild horses would not drag from us any mention of the sum that has changed hands!

The smart little restaurant of L'Escargot d'Or has long been known to the select few for the excellence of its *cuisine,* and lucky is he who is *persona grata* with its genial proprietor, Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet. . . .

"Bait, hook, line and sinker!" murmured Percival, when he read the effusion of *The Faun's* alert subeditor. "And that, I suppose, lets me out!"

He tossed the journal over to his friend and partner, Laverdet, and yawned with a delightful sense of freedom.

"I shall be obliged, my reverend employer," he said, "if you will take a week's notice, as from a week ago this minute, and if you will oblige me with a reference."

"Quoi donc?" muttered Laverdet, who was busy with accounts. "What is that, my friend?"

"If you will glance at page five of the lively journal I have just thrown at you," said Percival, "you will see that I have my order of release."

Laverdet turned over to the page mentioned and read it eagerly.

"Éha!" he remarked. "I understand. But what is this bet? Is it, as the journal says, a large sum of money that you have collected, then?"

"Unfortunately," Percival replied, "the idea does not occur to me until it is too late. If I had thought of it, my dear Archambaud, it would have been quite possible to cozen some easy money from the idle rich. But what would you? Missed opportunities—my life has been full of them. Never until this moment did I realize how sadly my talents have been neglected. *The Faun* reminds me that I have forgotten."

"You are, without flattery, exceptionally talented," said Laverdet warmly.

"Thank you for these 'ere kind words," said Percival lightly.

"But—is it not, then, true that you have collected

a large sum of money in payment of a bet?" demanded Laverdet. "Surely a respectable journal would not lie?"

"We do not call such pieces of journalism lies, my dear Archambaud," said Percival. "We rather term them the tergiversative publication as fact of the more reasonable hypothesis."

"I do not know him," breathed the bewildered Laverdet. "I do not know what you mean."

"I am not altogether sure that I quite know myself," Percival admitted. "But *The Faun* has given me an idea. In the future I am determined to employ my astonishing gifts to the full. As Dr. Johnson said: *Desidœ valedixi, syrenis istius cantibus surdam posthac aurem obversus.*"

"It sounds splendid," said Laverdet, "but what does it mean?"

"It means," Percival replied, "that henceforth *les affaires sont les affaires.* Or, in the vulgar, I'm on the make from cockcrow."*

"Éha!" nodded Laverdet. "And a very good thing too."

II

As a fact Percival Pemblebury had grown tired of

*Dr. Johnson himself, of course, translated the tag rather differently: "I bid farewell to sloth, being resolved henceforth not to listen to her syren charms."

being a waiter. In his experience, never within so short a time had he encountered so many of his friends. As customers of L'Escargot d'Or their numbers had been legionary. (No, not legendary, my dear sir—legionary. See Webster, Funk and Wagnall, *et hoc genus omne.*)

"What's the bright idea, Percival?" one of his friends turned up to ask. He was, in fact, that boisterous individual who smacked Percival on the back in Chapter II.

"Pardon, m'sieu'?" said Percival.

"Cut out the old French, old fruit," the boisterous one protested. "What particular doodah have you got on the brain-pan this time?'

"I beg m'sieu's pardon," Percival replied blandly, "but I do not understand him."

"Well—what I mean to say, old top, is—well—what I mean to say is—well, isn't it, I ask you?" the boisterous one remarked feebly.

"Again I fail to follow the meaning of m'sieu'," Percival said, hard-faced. "Would he please repeat?"

"I say, Percy, old thing—well, dash the business—you aren't balmy—I mean to say, blotto, old sardine, are you?"

"Would m'sieu be pleased to order anything?" Percival said calmly, holding out the *carte du jour.*

"Of course, of course—any old thing," the other

stammered. "I know you've got to do that sort of thing—and you can always depend on me, old boy, to do the right sort of thing—I mean, to fall in and surround you in the hollow-square type of business. But, seriously for a moment, old lad, you don't seriously mean to suggest that you seriously have to carry on with this bally waiter job—not seriously, I mean?"

"Look here, Buster," Percival remarked under his breath, "if you don't get busy and give me an order I'll biff you one on the nose!"

The other beamed in gratification.

"That's more lifelike," he said approvingly. "As I remarked before, you can always depend on me as a body of troops—I mean to say, to fall in when the jolly old bugle sounds 'The Cookhouse Door,' or any of those grand old tunes—steady, old thing! No need for the first shot in the great war just yet! Dash it all, then, bring me a piece of fish—with the mushroom dressing sort of business."

"*Sole Pompadour, m'sieu?* Certainly, m'sieu'."

Percival glided off, leaving the boisterous one in a state of bewilderment that bordered on coma.

"Completely blotto," Buster murmured in broken tones—"I mean to say—dash it all—poor old Percy—what?"

For a time he remained transfixed, then fell to rolling bread pellets, in a sort of half-daze. Having

rolled about a dozen, he began arranging them thoughtfully in elaborate formations.

"Form fours!" he muttered. "Form two deep—form fours—right—section, front! You'll have to step quicker, number two! Poor old Percy—what?—absolutely looney! Or is it—eh?"

A look of terror came into the face of Buster. He looked round the half-empty restaurant apprehensively, as if to see if he were watched. Then he took out a pocketbook from an inside pocket and whipped it smartly under the table. For a moment he fumbled in the wallet, then transferred something that rustled crisply to the side-pocket of his jacket. A measure of reassurance relieved the deep concern that had settled on his countenance. But just at that moment Percival appeared at the door of the serving pantry, and Buster looked as uncomfortable as ever.

"So this is the old sole, eh?" he murmured, as the dish was set in front of him. "And all the jolly little *champignons*—what?" He dropped his voice to a husky whisper. "I say, Percy, old egg, as between man and man, you know—between stable companions, in a manner of speaking—can't you spill the beans about this doodah? I mean to say, old horse, couldn't you shoot a little information about it of an authentic sort?"

"What will m'sieu' have to follow the sole?"

Percival demanded, completely oblivious of the whispered plea.

Buster, from his efforts to keep his voice low, became very red in the neck.

"I mean to say—" He choked. "Couldn't you cut out the French idea for a minute and listen? The lads of the village—I mean, the brighter frequenters of the environs—are naturally concerned about this doodah. They don't quite cotton to the idea. I say, Percy, why do you do it—I mean, this new doodah? Can't you slip me the office about it? Is it on a bet?"

'Will m'sieu' be good enough to order?" Percival said inexorably.

"Oh, dash it all—any old thing! More sole—bacon and eggs—anything," stuttered the unfortunate Buster.

"Repeat of sole—bacon and eggs," said Percival, jotting down the order. "Thank you, m'sieu'!" He glided away.

"Oh, damn—oh, damn—oh, damn!" Buster breathed. "It can't be on a bet! Either the poor old-timer has gone over-ripe in the melon—a little fruity in the *cantaloup,* so to speak—or else——"

Buster fingered his side-pocket fearfully, and cast a look of terror round the restaurant. He tried to lift the sole from the dish to his plate, but in his nerveless fingers the fork and spoon failed in their

function. The sole broke into pieces and fell among the sauce, splashing the tablecloth in a way that Buster regarded as simply hideous. He tried to wipe up the mess but succeeded only in knocking over a glass of water which in his nervous state he already had poured out with no intention of drinking. At these signs of distress Percival came hurrying along, the perfect waiter.

"Dash it all, Percy, old man," Buster whispered huskily, "I can't eat while you're on this doodah. It's all wrong—completely wrong! I'm afraid it's some scarcity in the old coffers and——"

He pushed his hand into his side-pocket and produced that which rustled crisply. This he shoved between Percival's fingers.

"It's only a small note—a fifty, old lad—but there's still one or two more in the wad if you need them. Pay the bill for me—I must scoot——"

He made a grab for his hat and cane and started running down the aisle of the restaurant. In his surprise Percival hesitated, but only for a moment; then he went after his friend at top speed. He was in time to grab Buster on the outside of the swing-doors. Percival cast an arm about his friend's neck and brought him up standing.

"Do you want me to biff you in the eye, you fat slob?" he demanded.

"No occasion for any doodah of the sort," re-

turned the half-strangled Buster. "Leggo my neck, Percy!"

Percival released him.

"What the devil do you mean by it, Buster?" he demanded fiercely.

"Well—I mean to say—mean by what, old thing?"

"Mean by shoving your filthy money into my fist?"

"But, I say—look here, Percy," stammered Buster. "We can't let any old scout—well, dash it all—if you're so hard up that you've got to start as a waiter—confound it, Percy—it jolly well can't be done. I mean to say, a fellow like you who ought to have the jolly old Victoria Cross and other gadgets——"

"Shut up, Buster!"

"Well, dash it all, Percy, you did come out into the wire for me that day——"

"Shut up, I tell you!"

"—on the Somme. Blast it, Percy. I think you owe me something!" Buster grew very indignant and glared at Percival.

"You do, you know. I mean to say—well, don't you?" he pleaded.

"Owe you something for what?" demanded Percival.

"For saving me from—for saving my bally life!"

"Tcha!" said Percival impatiently. "Look here, Buster," he went on after a pause, "there's no need for me to carry on with this waiter job any longer than I want to. Get that into the diseased turnip you call a head! I am more flush now than I have been for months. I don't need any money. I don't in the least need to work as a waiter."

"Then it *is* for a bet," said Buster, taking back the note which was held out to him. "I honestly thought the gallant bark was on a lee shore, so to speak. There has hardly been a sign of you in the environs for months. I thought you had been lying low."

"I must get back to my job," said Percival.

"Look here, Percival," Buster pleaded. "As man to man, is it, or is it not, for a bet?"

Percival took a deep breath—and lied.

"Yes, Buster," he said, "it's for a bet."

"Then," said Buster, "the old appetite returns. I'm afraid I dinted that sole pretty severely, but I'm coming back for it. Those jolly little *champignons* rather intrigued me."

The "hollow-square type of business" on the part of the normally ebullient Buster, and his nervous effort to support a man he fancied had dropped into extreme poverty, was for Percival the last touch. Those of his friends who had found in his escapade a chance to vent their humor he was well

able to handle. But the accumulation of encounters in L'Escargot d'Or had had a wearing effect on his equanimity, and the concern of Buster rather frayed his nerve. He was glad, therefore, when next morning *The Faun* gave as fact Buster's ultimate solution for the problem of Percival's strange behavior.

The root of Percival's uneasiness probably lay in his enforced inaction over the measures he proposed to institute for meeting Myrtle once again. Each day he had hoped to see her enter the restaurant. His longing to see her was bad enough to be defined as an actual ache. And he chafed at the inactivity he had imposed on himself.

Then, again, he had to fulfil his promise to Laverdet that Miss Kitty Kintore would come to the restaurant, and he saw that before that fact was accomplished much time would be absorbed which might be devoted to the pursuit of Myrtle. Further, his conscience was troubled over the question of the red lacquer cabinet. He had seen Hoggenbaum twice since the day when he had exhibited the cabinet, and each time the stout steel-merchant had inquired about the old lady to whom the desirable piece of furniture had belonged. About Percival's sudden metamorphosis into waiterdom Hoggenbaum said little, and for that Percival was grateful. But the presence of Hoggenbaum reminded him of the three tasks he had set himself and served to increase his impatience.

In the matter of Miss Kintore, however, Percival had not been altogether slack. When opportunity had occurred, either during *matinée* or evening performances, he had haunted the stalls of the Thespis Theater, and as far as he was able from such a distance he had formed some ideas regarding the personality of that astonishing little actress. He had helped out his mental impressions with a number of thumbnail sketches, and he had begun in *gouache* what he hoped would be probably the most remarkable drawing of herself that Miss Kitty Kintore had ever seen.

When *The Faun* published its dictum on his venture he saw that the idea would be accepted by most of the people who mattered to him, and he got into action at once. He went to a *matinée* at the Thespis for a final impression of Miss Kintore, and he spent the following morning in putting the last decisive touches to his drawing. It almost satisfied him when it was finished, and he knew in his heart—for all his habit of stern self-criticism in matters of art—that he had never done better work. He wrapped the drawing carefully in tissue and brown paper, addressed it to Miss Kintore, and carried it down to the stage door of the Thespis, where again on that day there was to be a *matinée*. Then he strolled round to L'Escargot d'Or, for he did not intend to miss a single meal there, lest Myrtle should appear in his absence.

III

Kitty Kintore, who, we will reiterate, was probably the world's most accomplished little artist in revue, pettishly told her dresser to cut the string of the large flat parcel. The multiplicity of presents she received in her brilliant career had not dulled her delight in the unexpected. She knew very well that she had not been photographed recently, and she was young enough to wonder what the flat parcel contained.

She was in the theater early for the *matinée* performance, and her lunch had been spoiled by the fact of her own lateness in turning up at the Savoy. She was a little irritable.

"Take the scissors, Maisie," she said to her dresser. "Don't fumble with the cord."

In her quiet, obedient way the dresser took the scissors held out to her and snipped the fastenings. She quickly unwrapped the covering paper and revealed a sketch in color of her mistress. She held it up.

"My!" said Kitty Kintore.

"I think it's very good of you, m'm," said the dresser.

"Good!" the actress repeated. "It is one of the most brilliant bits of drawing I've ever seen. If I'm like that—if the public see me like that—I don't

wonder I'm a success. Let me see it in my own hands."

She took the sketch and examined it critically. She put it up in front of her mirror and stepped back from the table.

Now Percival, when he chose, was a capable artist. When he was enthusiastic over a subject he painted with a certainty and brilliance not far removed from genius. Here he had been fired by inspiration, and with that allied to an astonishing technical ability he had caught a likeness that was startling. He had chosen to depict the actress in her popular Flame Dance, in which, wearing a costume suggestive of a gaudily colored moth, she fluttered round a great light streaming up through the stage floor.

"Now I wonder who did that?" said the delighted actress. She examined the signature in the corner of the drawing.

"Percival Something," she read.

"There's a note with it, m'm," the dresser announced, and held out an envelope.

Kitty Kintore took it, slit it open, and found in it a single sheet of notepaper.

"In admiration," ran the inscription, "Percival Pemblebury." And at the top of the sheet was a printed address.

The actress glowed with pleasure. Many artists

had tried to portray her, well-known and famous men to whom she had sat, but here was a man of whom she had never heard who had caught her very expression and personality apparently from the audience.

"I'm going to thank that young man," she said to her dresser. "I'm going to sit down right now, Maisie, and ask him to come and see me during the *matinée* on Thursday."

"How do you know he is young—or even respectable?" Maisie, a privileged person, asked quietly, as she turned a stocking in readiness for a change.

"I'm certain he's young," said Kitty Kintore decidedly. "About his respectability I don't care. But a man who can draw like that doesn't need to worry about being respectable."

"H'm!" Maisie grunted. "You'll likely find that he's old and dirty—with long hair and black fingernails!"

"Psha!" said Kitty. "I'm betting that he's young, lean, and very English. He can't be American or he'd be the talk of the town—an artist like him. I expect he's shy. Being English he'll drink tea, so remember to have some cakes for Thursday."

IV

"There's only one thing, Maisie, that I was wrong

about in him," said Kitty Kintore, as she frankly scrutinized Percival on the Thursday afternoon.

Maisie favored Percival with the smile due to a presentable young man, and made an equally frank inspection of him.

"Yes, m'm," she said.

Percival let a grin wreathe his countenance.

"I wonder what you expected to see?" he said.

"Maisie wasn't sure about your respectability."

"And you?" asked Percival.

"I didn't care. Maisie thought you'd be old and dirty, and have long hair and black fingernails."

Maisie found a lot to do in a distant corner of the room.

"You had no such anticipations?" Percival smiled.

"No, I said you'd be young——"

"I'm not exactly an infant."

"Lean——"

"An animated hop-pole maybe."

"Very English——"

"Since I can't be an American I'm glad enough to be very English."

"And shy."

"Good Lord!" said Percival.

"Well, you're hardly that," Kitty laughed. "That's where I made the break. Do you like tea?"

"I do. I'm a connoisseur, really. I ought to have been a curate."

"We'll have some presently. In a minute or two I'm going to thank you properly for that picture, but I've got to change. Maisie—the screen!"

From behind the screen, as she dressed for the stage, the little lady kept up a desultory flow of conversation, but said nothing further about Percival's sketch. She had him supplied with cigarettes, and as she went out for her first scene instructed Maisie that nobody was to be admitted—she was to be engaged all afternoon.

She flitted in and out of the room, disappearing behind the screen in one garb to come out almost immediately in another. The music from the orchestra came to the ears of Percival in snatches, the sound of voices in chorus, the wave-like gusts of applause. He thought of many things, but mostly about Myrtle. He wondered if he would find favor enough with Kitty Kintore to enable him to justify his boast to Laverdet.

It was far on in the afternoon before he learned how great an impression his drawing had made on the star.

Tea was brought in during the absence of Kitty Kintore, but Maisie did not at once invite him to it. A few seconds later the actress came running into the room and darted behind the curtain. She emerged in an incredibly short time, wearing the slightest of stage costumes.

"Now, young man," she said, "this is the longest wait I have in the whole show, and I've kept tea back until now so that I could talk to you. Pour out for us, Maisie."

"I don't think," she went on, "in all my life that I've ever been given anything that gave me more pleasure than that wonderful drawing you have done for me. I simply don't know how to thank you, Mr. Pemblebury. Besides being such a brilliant artist you must be one of the nicest men that ever happened. I know what I mean to express when I do the Flame Dance, and I've never seen a drawing more to my liking, or one that hit nearly as well just what I'm after in my dance. Of course, there's sex in the dance. But somehow you've got that without making it sensual. So I can say to you what might convey a wrong meaning to most men. If there's anything I can do, anything that is in my power to give you—I don't mean as a return for the compliment you've paid me, but to express my gratitude—you have only got to say what it is and I'll do it."

"My dear lady," said Percival humbly, "you make me almost ashamed——"

"Ah, you *are* shy!"

"No. It isn't that. I know the drawing is good, but I had not realized it was quite so good as your kindness would make it. The only thing I can ask

for is something I shall value very much—your friendship."

"I think you have that."

"And to seal that compact of friendship will you have luncheon with me one day—just to celebrate?"

"Why, yes," said Kitty Kintore. "I'll lunch with you to-morrow, if you like."

V

Percival made no apology for taking the great Kitty Kintore to the restaurant of L'Escargot d'Or, and he acted so exactly as if it were the thing to do that his little friend thrilled to a sense of adventure when the car swung into the dingy Soho street. Somehow the restaurant seemed to fit in with the neat, if threadbare, suit of the artist, though his well-cut collar, his cravat, and his boots would not have been out of place in the best restaurant in town. And the comfortable thing was that Kitty could feel she was not unduly costly to a poor man. She felt at ease.

The quality of her lunch surprised her. Little did she know of the trepidation with which Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet had watched the preparation of the *buisson d'écrevisse,* the *poulet à l'estragon,* or of his anxiety that the *tarte de la maison* should be just right.

"Is the food here always as good as this?" she asked.

"Yes, I think it is," said Percival. "Old Laverdet has one of the best *chefs* in London. I'll confess to you that, being rather a pal of mine, he got up this lunch specially at my request; but you have my word for it that the food here is first rate whatever is on the card."

"My! I haven't had a better lunch anywhere in this town," said Kitty. She was one of those delightful little women who understand and appreciate good food. "You artists certainly do look after yourselves."

"What saith the proverb?" answered Percival. " 'Where the good grub is, there will the artists be gathered together.' "

"Anyway," said Kitty with a smile, "I'm coming back here, and I'm going to bring a party next time. I feel as if I had made a discovery—thanks to you."

As this announcement reached the ears of Monsieur Laverdet, who was hovering about uneasily, those appendages reddened. Percival took the opening.

"In that case," said he, "you had better know the proprietor, Monsieur Laverdet. He will look after you better if you know each other."

He called over the beaming *restaurateur* and effected an introduction. The famous little lady was

commendatory enough to send the stout proprietor away in the seventh heaven of delight.

Percival and Kitty Kintore were sipping some excellent coffee and chatting easily, and Kitty was enjoying the nonsense poured into her ear by her *vis-à-vis,* when suddenly she narrowed her eyes.

"My!" she said.

"What's the matter?" asked Percival.

"I thought my publicity man, Sam Tootle, was the last word in go-ahead methods," she said, "but you, young man, have him beaten, I begin to think."

"How is that?"

"Why, you're the artist that turned waiter," Kitty said accusingly, but with a smile. "And this is the restaurant where you acted as *garçon.* When I read about it I saw at once that it was a publicity stunt."

Percival held up his two hands from the wrist.

"Mercy!" he grinned. "How did I spill the beans?"

"You've spilled no beans, Mr. Pemblebury. I just guessed. Your methods are your own, and they have a real quietness about them that is refreshing. I suppose I see some paragraphs in the Press to-morrow about my visit here?"

"You bet you do," said Percival frankly. "It will do you no harm," he pleaded.

"No. And I don't mind," Kitty replied, still

smiling. "But I'm real disappointed. I thought your drawing ability was a spontaneous tribute to my ability—and to the woman rather than to the actress with a publicity value."

"So it was," said Percival heartily. "I could no more have done that drawing than have jumped the Atlantic if I had not been fascinated by the subject. Honest!"

"Honest to goodness honest?"

"Sure."

"Then you're forgiven," said Kitty Kintore. "I shall do all I can for the restaurant. They do follow me about, you know."

"I know," said Percival, with a glance round the restaurant. "Thank you very much."

"No, don't thank me. I've seldom tasted better food, and the place is worth while. That's the main thing about your proposition—you deliver the goods. And I'll do anything I can for you. I only wish I could give you Sam Tootle's job, but I can't."

"I couldn't take it even if you would," said Percival, interested. "But why not?"

"Because Sam's my husband, and divorce is finished as a publicity stunt," Kitty calmly replied. "Besides," she added, "I'm just wild about Sam—more so when I have the laugh on him."

"And have you the laugh on him now?"

"Why, yes. Sam doesn't appreciate anybody getting publicity out of me unless there's a return for it. It must be your eyes, Percy."

Percival for once was completely nonplussed.

"My eyes?" he stammered.

"Has no girl ever told you that you have wonderful eyes?" Kitty demanded with a smile.

"N—no," said Percival doubtfully.

She gurgled, mischievously happy.

"There's only one thing could make a man like you grow shy at that raw stuff," she said. "Is she good-looking, Percy?"

"Is who good-looking?"

"This girl you've fallen for so badly?"

"She's—she's a dream," said Percival, suddenly husky. "But how did you know? Is my heart so plainly on my sleeve, Miss Kintore?"

"Why, you poor boy, it isn't on your sleeve at all. It's in your eyes. Tell me about her, Percy—and my friends usually call me Kit."

Percival told her.

"H'm—on the stage, you think she is?" the little actress mused. "Now look here, Percy. You go right after her. Find her. Bring her to me. If she wants to work until you're ready for her I'll find her something to do. But she won't want to work for long. Do you know anything about decoration?"

"Studied it at L'École des Beaux Arts in Paris and in Germany before the War," said Percival.

"Fine! You must do some scenes and costumes for the new edition of our show. We'll treat you well. You find only honest-to-God live Americans and English in my management, I can tell you, and not even my word will keep you there if you can't hold down the job on your own," said Kitty Kintore. "But I know you can hold down any job that's offered you. I'm betting on you, Percy."

"You can do that," said Percival quietly, "with the greatest safety. And thank you, Kit."

"Sam has gray eyes and a grin that comes once in a while," said Kitty in a dreamy sort of way. "Suffering cats, but I'm a lucky woman! When Sam began chasing me I thought it was too good to last, and I was half afraid to marry him. We've been married ten years now, Sam and I, but I still keep hoping for that grin of his. And he's still chasing me, bless him! Yes, you're a nice boy, Percy. Take me to my automobile this minute before I start wanting to kiss you."

Percival had the car brought to the door, and handed the little actress into it.

"Good-bye, Percy," said she through the open window. "Bring your sweetheart to see me when you find her. Start chasing her right now and never leave off chasing her for the rest of your

life. If you keep chasing her even when you've got her she'll be a happy woman—as I am."

"I think I understand, Kit," said Percival. "I'll do my best."

SOME TALK OF "HOW"

BELOVED, never sell a pup, nor gloss
With meretricious skill a thing of dross;
If glitter were the preciousness of gems,
You girls would buy your diamonds by the gross.

Myself when young, with pundit and with bore,
Vainly discussed of How and How—and tore
To shreds the insight and the craft of men
Who exercised their Art—what time *we* swore.

From these, the pundits, cranks, and babbling fools,
I picked upon the faults of all the schools;
Not this, nor that, nor these, nor those—but, ah!
With what slick ease did Whosit use his tools!

Alas, that babbling fools with wrinkled nose
Jammed hard against a canvas should impose
The dictum that the Aim and End of Paint
Is How the artist does—not what he KNOWS.

But those I love most thankfully and best,
Now Time from me the envious bane has prest,
Are those from whom I learn some simple truth
They have observed, and simply have exprest.

Leave THUS and How to those who can not Do;
The poorest skill will serve a turn or two
To tell the thoughtful what you've seen or learned—
How—given reasonable facility—matters little if the
WHAT be true.

"The Red Boat Full of Cayenne"
From "The Parodies of Percival"

CHAPTER IX

THE GIRL NAMED MYRTLE

Après tout, c'est un monde passable.
VOLTAIRE

I

SINCE Percival had posted the card which he had hoped would bring the girl named Myrtle to the restaurant of L'Escargot d'Or more than a week had passed, and the card had failed to produce any such appearance. After his release from his self-imposed ancillary labors the impatience of Percival hardly needed the spur of Kitty Kintore's advice that he should go immediately in chase. The address given on the envelope so carelessly left on the luncheon-table by the girl was of a small town in Berkshire, within easy motoring distance of London. It was possible, accident apart, to drive to Ingate Abbey and to be back in town in time for lunch. And when the little actress was giving her advice Percival already had determined on a course of ac-

tion. She had no sooner driven off than he was making his way to the telephone.

"Buster," he said, when the connection was established, "you won't have any particular use for your small car to-morrow, I know?"

"As a matter of fact, old citizen," came the voice of Buster, mildly aggrieved, "I had. But, of course, if this is really the old bugle-call to rally round sort of business, there isn't any particular use I can think of that won't wash out. In point of fact, Percy old thing—'Trumpeter, what are you sounding now?'"

"Make it the sound of the rally, Buster," said Percival.

"Right," said Buster with admirable brevity; "when and where?"

"Half-past nine to-morrow morning at Timkins's Yard, to drive to Ingate Abbey and be back in town for lunch, maybe."

"Nine-thirty to-morrow, Place Spaghetti, with car," Buster murmured, as if jotting down the order. "Right, Percy. No further information about the particular doodah?"

"Not over the phone," returned Percival.

He was, however, rather more communicative next morning when, after Buster had picked him up promptly at half-past nine, the pair were threading their way through the traffic of West London on their way to Berkshire.

"Curious old bird you are," said Buster, nonchalantly avoiding a brewer's tray by a hair's breadth. "Don't know anything about the girl, but made up your mind for the high jump—the jolly old halter, so to speak. Well, well, and other expressions of mild surprise! What makes you think she has something to do with the theater?"

"Notice that Sornewell the tenor has been out of the cast of *Soft Goods?*" asked Percival.

"Something the matter with his song-box, isn't it?"

"I expect there is," said Percival. "I fancy it was him I plugged on the larynx that night."

"Then the big 'un would be Ned Bailey," Buster suggested. "Sornewell is his jackal—lousy beast!"

"That's my idea," said Percival. "I thought I recognized the pair of them that night. And I made inquiries. There was a girl called Myrtle Gililland in one of Bailey's touring companies."

"Regular sleuth, aren't you? Well, and what's the bright idea—I mean to say, where's the connection between this trip and the fact of the girl being on the stage?"

"If any one asks what my business is after the girl, I'm taking her the offer of a job with Kitty Kintore. I'll need some excuse," Percival explained.

"Bright idea," said Buster, and gave the car more speed.

II

The little town of Ingate Abbey, although so close to London, still wears a countrified air. It contains quite a few good specimens of a domestic architecture indigenous to the local soil—quaint cottages with pargeting, half-timber, old brick, flint, and thatched roofs. It can boast of an early English abbey in an almost perfect state of repair. And it has an inn the sign of which carries a procession of black swans high across the narrow main street. It is not much more than a village, when all is said, so that the adventurers had not a bewildering choice of places where they might institute inquiries. They chose the most prosperous-looking of three grocery stores.

"Miss Gililland, sir?" said the shopman in a puzzled way. "No, sir. Don't know anybody of that name in the town. Don't you know the name of the house, sir?"

"Kingscote," said Percival.

"Kingscote! Why, that's Mrs. Barham's house, out on the Oxford road. Biggish house in red brick on the right, standing back from the road a goodish bit. But there isn't anybody with her by the name you said. Not as far as I can remember—unless it was a servant?"

"I don't think the lady we are looking for is

that," said Percival. "I fancy that she is Mrs. Barham's niece. Is Mrs. Barham a large-sized lady of a rather determined character?"

The shopman grinned.

"Determined's the word, sir. Masterly lady—and got some weight with it, too."

"Ah," said Percival, "I think she's the lady I mean."

"There is a niece, sir, now I come to think of it, but she don't come here much. A very pretty young lady, sir—I don't know what the name is. I always thought it was Barham."

"Thank you very much," said Percival. "I think you have put us right."

"Excuse me, sir," the shopman insinuated, "but if it's the young lady you want to see, I don't think she's with her aunt just now. I'm certain I saw her go off with some luggage the other morning."

Percival masked his chagrin at the information.

"It doesn't matter," he said calmly. "We'll see Mrs. Barham."

But outside the store he showed a different countenance to the faithful Buster.

"Don't like the sound of that, Buster," said he. "I have an uncanny hunch that we're out of luck."

"Pooh—tut!" said Buster. "Yoicks, tally-ho, hark forra'd—and other hunting expressions. We're on a scent, anyhow. Jump in!"

They drove out on the Oxford road and without difficulty identified the house for which they were searching. They left their car outside the gate and marched up the path in close order. On their inquiry for Mrs. Barham a servant led them into a sunny parlor and left them, taking Percival's card with her.

"Yoicks, tally-ho, hark away—and other expressions of the chase," said Buster encouragingly. "At least we're aboard the lugger, and the logical sequence is that the girl is yours, old top!"

"I fear me that there's a large party ready to repel boarders," Percival replied, with something of a shiver of foreboding. "But never say die!"

"That's the old spirit!" Buster said. "Given a stout heart and a steady hand——"

The door of the room opened, and the stout lady Percival had seen with Myrtle came into the room majestically—formidably. She eyed Buster almost with malignance, upon which the expression on his face became one of extreme vacuity.

"Mr. Pemblebury?" the stout lady asked of him.

"Groo-ook!" he remarked, and waved a hand feebly in the direction of Percival.

"Are you Mr. Pemblebury?" the lady now demanded of the right man.

"Yes, madam," Percival made answer. "I am Mr. Pemblebury. I——"

"And to what," asked the lady, interrupting him, "and to what may I attribute the honor?"

"Mrs. Barham, may I understand?" asked Percival in turn. He began to feel cooler. The stout lady nodded.

"Mrs. Barham," he went on, "I took the liberty of calling to inquire about a young lady who, I believe, is your niece—Miss Gililland—Miss Myrtle Gililland——"

"I have no niece of that name," said the stout lady crisply. "I have a very undutiful niece who chooses to masquerade about the country with mountebanks and strolling players, and she apparently prefers an assumed name to that of her father, my brother. And what, pray, have you to say to my niece?"

"Tantivy, tantivy, tantivy!" Buster murmured *sotto voce*. "Yoicks—and other expressions!"

"Madam," said Percival, "my message is for Miss Myrtle Gililland, but if you have no niece of that name I can hardly deliver it to you, can I?"

"I suppose your message has something to do with the—with the clown business?"

"With the clown business?" breathed Percival.

"With the jumping-jack, tumbling, mountebank business—the face-painting, barn-storming, out-at-heels, performing-monkey business," said the stout lady angrily.

"I have no objection to delivering my message to Miss—Miss——"

"To Miss—huh?" the lady said unhelpfully.

"To the young lady known as Miss Gililland," Percival explained. "I have no objection to telling her my message in your presence, if you will call her."

"She isn't here," Mrs. Barham said tartly.

"May I inquire where she is to be found?" asked Percival gently.

"You may," said the stout lady, "inquire! You may inquire as often as you like. But you'll get no help from me in anything that concerns the—the juggling business. My niece, who might have a good home with me here—a home with every comfort and luxury that a girl could want—prefers to trapes the country and grin like a painted zany in front of crowds of gaping fools. Well, she'll get no help to it from me. Let her! Let her! I expected nothing better when my brother made a fool of himself over an actress—that simpering doll, Molly Gililland! Pah!"

"Yo-icks!" muttered Buster feebly.

"Eh?" the stout lady glared at him. "What did you say?"

"Nothing, madam, I assure you," stammered Buster. "I mean to say—well, dash it all—Percy Pemblebury's a perfectly good sort—saved my life

once. I only coughed, madam—tickle in the throat, I mean to say. Perfectly honorable chap, Percy—ought not to be barked at——"

"Eh? What's that?" demanded the stout lady.

"Well, I mean to say, madam—dash it all—I ask you! When a chap like Percy is all ready in a perfectly honorable way for the high jump business——"

The stout lady strode to the bell-pull and jerked the cord violently. A servant appeared immediately.

"Jane, the door! I haven't time," Mrs. Barham said pointedly, "to waste on clowns and acrobats! Good morning!"

"Madam——" Percival began.

"Good morning! And—stay! If ever you should meet my niece tell her that as soon as she likes to give up the theater my door will be open to her. But not before! Good morning, Mr. Pumblebury. Tcha!"

The adventurers found themselves in the roadway beside their car.

"I gather," said Buster feebly, "I gather that the stout lady wasn't altogether impressed with us!"

III

If in his first essay in pursuit of his love affair Percival thus received a nasty jolt it was otherwise

with the fortunes of L'Escargot d'Or. The business of the restaurant continued to show an upward curve. At lunch-time and at dinner crowds kept the reinstated Alphonse and two new helpers always on the run. Madame Laverdet, resplendent in a new silk dress, sat with dignity behind the low screen of the cash-desk and handled the bills urbanely, but with accuracy and dispatch.

The new *chef,* Monsieur Diderot, was fulfilling the high promise Laverdet had held out of him. His *entrecôtes* and his *rôtis* were succulent and appetizing, his soups were of the most delicate flavor. He sent up fish so beautifully cooked that their flakes seemed to melt in the mouth.

Small wonder, therefore, that Monsieur Archambaud Laverdet walked about his restaurant smiling happily, attending with smooth courtesy to the merest signal of a wish from his guests.

Percival haunted this agreeable atmosphere with something of a chastened look on his usually cheerful enough countenance. The most searching inquiries both in Ingate Abbey and in town had failed to elicit the smallest clue to the whereabouts of the girl called Myrtle. He and the excellent Buster exhausted all their expedients within a week of their adventure in the Berkshire town. It was with a touch of despair that Percival clung to the habit of missing no meals at L'Escargot d'Or.

"My friend," said Laverdet one day, just before lunch-time, "I am thinking to arrange taking over the premises next door, and the first floor, if you agree."

"I agree all right," said Percival listlessly, "though I don't see what it has to do with me."

"You are my partner——"

"Pooh, my dear Archambaud," said Percival, "that washes out."

"It can never be wash' out," Laverdet declared with some emotion. "See what a success you have made of L'Escargot d'Or! How many famous people come here? Have you not seen how crowded the restaurant becomes day and night? Has not Lady Juno Habbits been 'ere four or five days this week—and your friend, Miss Kintore, has she not brought a party every other day? I confide in you," he whispered, "that a certain famous politician is moving the strings so that I may have a license."

"Splendid!"

"Yes, my friend. And it is all thanks to you. It is you who have did it. When I remember that it all grew out of a debt I dun' you for—a mere bagatelle—it shames me. It is nothing that I make you a partner. I owe you everything."

"My dear Archambaud," said Percival soberly, "you only needed the chance. Everything was here

except the publicity. Nothing could have made the restaurant pay if it had been a bad restaurant. I am delighted that your affairs are prospering. I only wish," he added with a sigh, "that I could say the same of mine."

The good Laverdet put up his two hands as if asking the attention of high heaven to such a cruel state of affairs.

"Ah," he said, "that! How many days have I reserve' for you the table for two? It comes to be over two weeks. And still she does not appear."

"She will come," said Percival through his teeth. "She must come—she can't *not* come!"

Laverdet put a podgy hand on the young fellow's arm.

"I believe you, my friend," he said gently. "She will come."

Percival nodded and drifted over to his place of vigil at the table for two. He took out a case and selected a cigarette. At that moment the door of the restaurant opened, and Percival lifted up his eyes to meet the lowering gaze of Mr. Macpherson. It was the first time that they had met since the day when Percival had waited on the Scot. That worthy man walked right over to Percival's table.

"Well, Aristide," said he, "—or shall I call you Mr. Pemblebury?—you've given up the waiting ploy?"

Percival grinned.

"As you see," he said.

"Man," said the old Scot, "you diddled me nicely. I had never a notion that you werna the French waiter you pretended. But buying thae pictures and reading the splore in the papers, I understood finally that you were Percival Pemblebury. I suppose this was an advertising stunt?"

"Yes. An advertisement for L'Escargot d'Or."

"But not for yoursel'?"

"Well, no. I don't advertise——"

"Ye ha'e no need," said Mr. Macpherson shortly. "I bought your pictures on their merits. Ye ha'e the rudiments of the penting business about ye."

"Thank you," Percival smiled.

"What for d'ye no hold an exhibition?"

"I don't seem to have had the time, nor the money, since the War."

"Huh!" grunted Macpherson. "I've just come back from Paris, where I've been negotiating for an interest in a gallery, and I hear the name o' Percival Pemblebury isn't altogether unknown over there. You've been wasting time, young man," he said sternly.

"Mea culpa," said Percival.

"I should think so," Macpherson said dryly.

"Now, look here, ma mannie. I'm the owner of the Burin Galleries, and I did secure the controlling

interest of the gallery in Paris. Then, again, I have a factory out Richmond way where I reproduce pictures in color and frame them for sale in the gimcrack shops. What would ye say if I offered to buy the copyright of the best of your sketches and offered you an exhibition both here and in Paris?"

"I could hardly say anything, Mr. Macpherson. Your offer takes my breath away."

"Tuts! Nonsense! You arena one o' the breathless kind—if you've cheek enough for that waiter ploy. What do ye say to it?"

"I say thank you very much," said Percival warmly. "I'm willing to enter into negotiations at once—and with gratitude."

"Weel," said Macpherson, "we'll talk o' it by and by. Are you exhibiting at this new spring show in the St. James?"

"I am," Percival replied.

"Good?" asked Macpherson.

"Best thing I've ever done," said Percival.

"We must ha'e a talk some ither time—when you're free." He tapped the tipped chair and looked over his shoulder at the door. "Here she comes."

Percival looked past the Scot, and his heart leapt within him. The girl called Myrtle was entering the restaurant, and he knew he had never seen anything more desirable or lovely. He looked at the elderly Scot in surprise.

"How did you know?" he whispered.

"I'm fairly auld," said Macpherson, "but my eyesight's good—and I've an excellent memory for faces."

With a straight face the old man walked away, and Percival stood up as, according to prearranged plan, Laverdet ushered the girl to the vacant chair with profound apologies for the lack of unengaged space.

Myrtle lifted her eyes to meet the serious gaze of Percival. It must have been that there she read something of fate, for she became breathless.

"Oh!" she gasped faintly.

"My dear, my dear," Percival whispered to himself. Then aloud he said gently: "Won't you sit down? I hoped you would turn up. I—I sent you a card."

"Yes, I know, but I did not get it until yesterday. My aunt must have held it up, for I got it with a bundle of letters very old of date."

"Mrs. Barham!" said Percival.

"Yes."

"I went out to Ingate Abbey about a week ago to look for you. She was very cross about something."

"She was cross about me—because I wouldn't give up the stage. It became so unbearable that I had to leave her house. She's a dear, really—but very determined. That night—you remember?—when you

sent me in a taxi to Paddington—I went straight to her. Of course, my appearance at that time of night gave ground for the worst of her suspicions. I couldn't exactly explain without adding fuel to her fire, because you rescued me from—from something rather rotten."

"I guessed as much," said Percival. "Do I have the explanation now?"

"I think it is your due," said the girl. "I felt a beast because I couldn't tell you that night. I didn't want to publish the story abroad. I was afraid it would come to the ears of my mother. I was in one of Ned Bailey's touring companies—with *The Peach.* It was Ned Bailey you thrashed that night—the big one."

"I thought I knew the blighter."

"Bailey saw me on tour," the girl went on, "and picked me out as good at my work. Little Ginnigan, the producer, spoke for me. I was playing a small part. Bailey took me out to supper one night and offered me a principal part in a new play in town. Of course, I was delighted, and thought my great chance had come. I came to town and took a room at the Wicklow Court Hotel—on Bailey's advice. When I had been there three weeks there was still no sign of the new play coming on and my money had nearly run out. I told Bailey, and he said that he would find me inexpensive rooms elsewhere.

That was what he had been waiting for. I found myself in a house that Bailey runs, and it was made pretty clear to me that the promised part had—was—well——"

"Had strings to it, shall we say?" said Percival.

"That's it," the girl agreed. "He was very frank about it. I was to have the part at the Arcadia—and money to burn. I did not find out until late that it was Bailey's house. He tried to stop me from leaving—offered to leave the house himself—but I put on my coat and hat and collected my stuff. Even then he tried to stop me. That was when you came along. He and the other man, that beast——"

"Sornewell, the tenor?" asked Percival.

"Yes—Bailey's jackal."

"Whoopee!" cried Percival. "I spoiled his singing for a while!"

"You were wonderful," breathed the girl. "I saw it all from the porch where I stopped. I laughed at the neat way you made the servant sit on them both!"

"Pooh!" said Percival. "A mere bagatelle. The man was standing all over his own feet.

"Myrtle," he broke off to say earnestly, "I love you."

"Oh, Percival!" said the girl.

IV

Alphonse appeared by the table.

"Now that you are here," said Percival to the girl called Myrtle, "you must have something to eat. Shall I choose for you?"

"Oh, please do. I don't like choosing. I always gaze at the *carte* blankly for about an hour—then I choose quite the wrong things."

"I'm glad you're like that," said Percival blandly. "I'm a real prize nib at choosing. Percival Chooser Pemblebury is my full name. I'll always choose your luncheons for you when we are married."

For a moment the directness of the statement staggered the girl, and a faint color came into her cheeks. Then she laughed softly.

"How do you know we shall be—what you say?" she asked.

Percival had given an order, and the waiter had gone away.

"I have a hunch that way," he replied. "That's another of my names—Hunch."

"You appear to be as numerously named as a member of the Royal Family," smiled the girl. "But if I do not choose you, as you seem to choose me, what then?"

"You can't expect to reach my standard of choosing all at once," Percival replied blandly. "You see,

I have prizes and prizes, and cups and cups, and fishknives and things for choosing. I'm the Champion Chooser really, but I'm traveling *incognito* at the moment."

"What! Champion Wife Chooser are you? You must have had a lot of practice."

"Not Wife Chooser," corrected Percival; "simply Chooser—just like that. As a matter of fact, wives are ruled out of the competitions now. It got to be so complicated. I never chose under the old rules. You're the first wife I've chosen, so far."

At that moment the waiter came up with the first dish, and Percival waited until they were both served.

"No," he resumed when the waiter had gone, "all you need is a little training in choosing; after that I don't fancy you'll make the mistake of choosing any one but me."

The girl suddenly found it hopeless to compete against Percival's bland idiocy. She resigned herself to laughter.

"I can find nothing to laugh at in a perfectly serious conversation," said Percival mildly. "How do you like this soup?"

"It is awfully good," Myrtle said. "What do you call it, Mr. Pemblebury?"

" 'Bortsch' it is called. But since we are engaged to be married it might be as well to stick to the

Percival. I hope you will allow me to call you Grizel?"

"Why Grizel? My name is Myrtle."

"Yes, I know. You told me. One moment you look like a Myrtle, and the next you look like a Hazel, but you look more like a Grizel than either. It's your eyes. They keep changing color. When I first saw you I thought your eyes were gray. The next time I thought they were violet. Now I see that they are really blue. Yes, I shall call you Grizel."

"But I don't want to be Grizel," the girl protested.

"You *will* be in the picture I'm going to paint of you. It will be called *Grizel,* and it will be the most perfect study of grays and golds. Your eyes and your hair, you know. You will have to wear something gray such as you have on now. It will be a famous picture, but it will not be for sale. People will understand that, of course, when they see the subtitle in the catalogue, 'Wife of the Artist.' It will be in profile."

"Profile!" cried the girl. "I hate my profile—my hooky nose! It's like a bean!"

"Ah," said Percival, "and now at last there comes a chance to introduce my song and dance. In other words, I hereupon write you a triolet on your lovely profile."

He half shut his eyes and began to recite:

"Your profile is exquisite,
Your nose faintly aquiline,
You hate it? I don't a bit.
Your profile is *exquisite!*
Fragondard would have raved o'er it,
Its line is so clean.
Your profile *is* exquisite
Your nose *faintly* aquiline!"

"Of course," said Percival after this effort, "we might make the sixth line: 'That quaint little bean!'—and in fact I was tempted to use the rhyme you supplied. But how do you like my triolet?"

"I think it lovely," said Myrtle. "I've never heard anything that reconciled me so much to my nose."

"If you could see your dear little nose as I see it," Percival said, "you would need no reconciliation. I would not have it changed the smallest fraction of an inch."

"I think you are one of the nicest men I have ever met," said Myrtle gratefully.

"I'm going to be the nicest man you'll ever know," Percival said soberly. Then he smiled. "Of course," he went on, "since we are to be married it might be well if I told you the tale of my life. Percival Pemblebury was born in the village of Dolittle, not far from London and the Scottish border. His father was a gentleman of means who worked for his living. Percival was educated at

Eton and Harrow and Oxford and Cambridge. He gave up bootmaking for Art and grew, as you will have observed, into a short, sturdy young fellow with laughing blue eyes and curly fair hair—if it had not been for his figure and hair, which are rather stringy and dark respectively."

"What are you talking about?" asked Myrtle.

"I'm telling you the tale of my life," said Percival earnestly. "Don't you like it?"

"I can't say that I do—altogether."

"In that case," Percival said cheerily, "I must try another one. How would you like it? The last was in the manner of O. Henry—what about a touch of Arnold Bennett?"

"Please be serious."

"I am serious—very serious. This is the crux, the climax, the crisis of my life. On this depends my future—and yours. I don't want to tell you a story of my life that would put you off me. I want to tell you a story that will make you interested in me."

"Suppose you tell me the truth, then?"

"Ah," returned Percival, "there are so many ways of telling the truth. Three perfectly veracious people give accounts of the same thing; do you suppose for a moment they all use exactly the same words and the same manner?"

"No, I don't say that."

"Very well, then. It behoves—or is it behooves?—me to be very careful in what I say. Let me give it you, however, in tabloid form. I am an artist. I have no money—yet. And I never loved any one but you in all my life——"

"I understood you were going to tell the truth?"

"I am telling the truth—bald-headed. I am an artist with no money——"

"I believe that," said Myrtle. "It is the last bit I can hardly credit."

"That's the truest thing of the lot," Percival replied. "I am only something of an artist. I have over three pounds in my pocket and have more to come—lots more. Only relative truth so far. I have never, never loved any one but you—and that's complete truth."

In many ways the girl called Myrtle Gililland was old-fashioned. Thus, in spite of the airy manner in which Percival delivered himself of the last declaration, she followed intuitions and discovered an underlaying sincerity that appealed to her. This dark-haired young fellow with the clean brown face looked so straight and wholesome that the liking she had already conceived for him grew warmer in her heart. There was everything to like about him. Another man, meeting a girl under such a surrender on her part of convention, might have been subtly, or openly, offensive—she had been long enough

connected with the stage to know that. When she took the risk of coming to meet Percival she knew that possibly she might find a cad. No cad could have stood the test of such surrender as she had made.

In Percival's fantastical manner, in his barefaced assumption that they ultimately would be married, she could find no trace of offence. She could only find something that made her heart go faster, made it glow within her. It was all absurd and ridiculous, no doubt—and yet—— She drifted off into a day-dream.

"I gather, somehow, that your mother is widowed," she heard Percival say.

"Oh, yes," she replied dreamily. "My father died when I was very tiny."

"There must be a brother or an uncle somewhere," Percival went on. "I want to meet your mother, but I must meet your menfolk."

And there came to Myrtle the realization that, like herself, this very modern young fellow was very safely old-fashioned.

V

Friend Buster at this moment appeared at the door of the restaurant, and seeing Percival made straight for his table. He apparently was in a hurry.

Myrtle was sitting with her back to the door, so that Buster did not have a good look at her until he had come right up to the table.

"I say, Percy——" he began. Then his gaze fell upon the girl, and his mouth opened slackly. "Gosh!" he said.

"What's the matter?" asked Percival.

Buster, with eyes goggling, nodded toward the amazed Myrtle. "I say, Percy—I mean, is this *her?*" he stammered.

"Let me introduce you. Miss Myrtle Gililland—my very good pal Dick Carruthers, commonly known as Buster. Don't let his funny manner worry you, Myrtle. He has been helping me to try to find you, and being considerably a naïf cuss the shock of seeing you is rather too much for him."

Myrtle held out her hand, and Buster took it in his big paw as if it had been a soap bubble.

"Gosh!" said Buster again. "You are a humdinger, aren't you? I mean to say—you're rather a gorgeous thing in peaches! Don't think me rude, Miss Gililland, but you are the prettiest thing that ever—aren't you?"

A fine pink was suffusing Myrtle's fair skin, but she managed to laugh genuinely.

"Your frankness is just a wee bit embarrassing, Mr. Carruthers," she said. "I should like my hand back, please."

"Oh, yes—certainly—I mean to say, of course!" Buster murmured, and released her fingers. "Gosh!"

"Sit down, Buster," Percival said soothingly, "sit down and have a bite to eat. Season your admiration for a while and report progress."

Buster sank into a chair and tried to focus his attention on the menu-card that Percival held out to him, but his gaze kept straying back to the girl opposite him.

"My friend Buster," Percival explained to the rather bewildered Myrtle, "has been helping me on another affair. I'd better tell you something about it."

He told her briefly of the red lacquer cabinet, and how he was searching for the lady to whom it had belonged.

"I was selfish enough," he concluded, "to leave the search for the owner of the cabinet until I had found you. But now I have found you and don't intend to lose you again, I must get on the trail of the old lady. You understand that?"

"I think I do," Myrtle said, with more emotion than the story seemed to warrant. "I understand very well. And I think it splendid of you. How much have you found out about her?"

"We just know that she used to live in Ebury Street, and that her name is Mrs. Fotheringill. Buster went down to see if he could ferret out any

more information. I could not leave my post here in case you should turn up."

"What's the report, Buster?" he asked his friend.

"Not much, old citizen," Buster replied, "except that she has gone down to Surrey."

"That isn't much further forward," Percival remarked, "but it is something to know the direction, anyhow."

"Have you by any chance discovered what was the actual number in Ebury Street?" Myrtle asked quietly.

"Oh, yes," said Buster, and he mentioned the number.

"Then it is likely, if you address a letter to her at that number in Ebury Street, that the post-office people will forward it. It is quite probable that she left a redirection with them."

"Heavens!" said Percival. "Trust a girl to discover the sensible solution!"

Myrtle rose from her seat.

"What's the matter?" Percival demanded. "You aren't going?"

"I must," said Myrtle.

"But—I can't let you go like this!—I don't know where you live. I know no more about you than I did three weeks ago."

"No?" said Myrtle quietly.

Percival smiled.

"Well, yes, I suppose I do know more about you. If I let you go, when shall I see you again?"

"I promise you I shall be here at the same time a week from to-day," said Myrtle. "But it may be that we shall meet again sooner than that. What you have to do meantime, Percival, is to find Mrs. Fotheringill and get the affair of the cabinet settled. Write to her at Ebury Street. I feel, somehow, that you'll get an answer."

"But I wanted to introduce you to Miss Kitty Kintore—there may be a part for you in the new show at the Thespis."

"That must wait too," said Myrtle determinedly. "I'd like you to get the affair of the red lac cabinet finished before you start bothering about me. Now good-bye!"

"Good-bye. A week from to-day, then—here?"

"A week from to-day—here," Myrtle agreed, "unless we meet before. Good-bye, Mr. Carruthers."

"Good-bye, Miss Gililland," Buster stammered.

He gazed after her as she made for the restaurant door, and not until the swinging flaps had closed behind her did he turn to the equally rapt Percival.

"Gosh!" said Buster. "Gosh!

"Percy," he went on, after a long pause, "this doesn't express my feelings with the faintest degree of accuracy; but—don't you think you're just the luckiest bargee alive?"

A SONG FROM THE HEART

I WILL praise my lady love,
And praise her heaven-high,
For she has wit and loveliness
Golconda could not buy.
Her hair is like the amber corn,
And tendrils of the vine
Are these her curls. Her teeth are pearls,
Her lips cramoisy wine.

And when I see my lady love
Come walking down the lea,
I think a dryad has come out
From some straight, slender tree.
Her limbs fall with a lissom grace—
Diana of the hills—
And in her voice sweet sounds rejoice
As in the crooning rills.

I must praise my lady love,
For she is fair to see.
Her heart is like a cup of wine
Held out in love to me;
In those warm lips I taste the cup,
And deep in eyes ashine
I find in truth this brimming youth,
This loveliness, is mine!

From "The Pomes of Perc"

CHAPTER X

THE INEVITABLE

Ὦ Σχυγαρ, ὠ Σπεις, ἀνδ ἀλλ θατ ἰς νεις.

SOPHCYDISTOCLES

I

OUTSIDE old Spanish manuscripts Percival Pemblebury had never seen handwriting more beautiful. It was too individual to be compared with copperplate, yet every letter was perfectly formed, the capitals graceful but unflourished. It was most obviously the handwriting of a lady, and an old-fashioned one at that. The paper of the missive was thick and creamy of texture, and, while not definitely scented, a faint fragrance, as of lavender or verbena, clung to it. The note ran as follows:

Mrs. Fotheringill presents her compliments to Mr. Percival Pemblebury and thanks him for his very kind letter. She begs to say that she will gladly receive him as soon as he may find it convenient to come into the country, and since she is almost al-

ways at home Mr. Pemblebury may choose his own time.

Mrs. Fotheringill assures Mr. Pemblebury that she is very sensible of his kindness in writing her about the red lacquer cabinet, and she looks forward to meeting a gentleman of so rare a courtesy.

Percival had got out of bed at the postman's morning knock and had returned to the warmth of his blankets after picking up his letters from the floor.

He read the note for the second time, and sniffed at the paper on which it was written.

"I'll bet," he said to himself, "that she's a perfect old dear."

Percival decided to waste no time in the matter, but to get down into Surrey that morning. For once he broke his strict self-discipline and left his breakfast dishes unwashed, but he dressed with particular care. He caught a train shortly after ten o'clock and arrived in the pretty little village of Gomshere about noon.

Percival knew the village like an old friend. At one time it had been the haunt of artists, who thronged the old inn, the White Horse, to the delight of the host, himself considerably a painter. But art has its fashions like everything else, and with the incursion of amateurs the environs became a *cliché;* the professionals had to go further afield for sub-

jects, until nothing was left to remind the traveler of Gomshere's one-time glory except sundry sketches adorning the walls of the inn, flanked by *chefs d'œuvre* from the brush of the landlord.

To Percival's inquiry for the cottage of Mrs. Fotheringill the landlord gave minute direction and would have held him in converse about olden visitors. But Percival's impatience brooked no reminiscence, and telling his old friend that he would return he went on his way.

Lavender Cottage was on the outskirts of the village and stood on the edge of a shadowy wood. It was a quaint old structure of plastered brick, with a red-tiled roof, mossy with age. A neat little garden fronted it, and fronds of wisteria depended from its face. It could hardly have been more appropriate, Percival thought, to house the old lady he imagined, from her letter, he was about to see.

In answer to his knock the door was opened by an elderly woman-servant, soft-voiced and faintly smiling.

"Oh, yes, sir," she said in reply to Percival's inquiry, "Mrs. Fotheringill is at home, and I think she is expecting you. Are you Mr. Pemblebury?"

"Yes," said Percival.

"Step inside, sir, please."

She led the way up a narrow lobby and opened a door.

"Mr. Pemblebury, ma'am," she announced, and stepped aside to let Percival pass.

Percival crossed the threshold and saw a slim lady in black silk, with a Paisley shawl covering her shoulders, sitting at the window of the room, with her back to the light. He saw that, despite the fact she was not a girl, her hair was an aureole of dim gold, and that in the graceful poise of the head and slightly wasted figure there were the remnants of what must at one time have been exceptional beauty.

"Mr. Pemblebury?" the lady inquired in a voice that made him think of bells and brooks and the fluting of birds.

Percival bowed.

"You must pardon me that I don't rise to greet you," the lady said; "I am rather lame."

She held out a slim hand, and Percival went forward to take it in his. Her other hand rested on the crook of an ebony cane, and with this she pointed to a chair opposite her, facing the light of the window.

"Please be seated, Mr. Pemblebury," she said. "It is kind indeed of you to come so promptly. You must have received my note only this morning?"

"Yes," Percival agreed.

"Your letter puts it beyond all doubt that the red lacquer cabinet once was mine. My old friend Sir George Bingham left me what was probably the

gem of his collection, and of course Sandham would be able to identify it. How did it come into your possession, Mr. Pemblebury?"

"I bought it from a man named Israels."

"From Israels!" she cried. And then, musing: "Yes. It would be from Israels."

"But," she went on, "since the cabinet is yours by purchase, Mr. Pemblebury, what have I to do with it? Do you come to me for a further assurance that it is genuine—that it is from the collection of Sir George Bingham?"

"No, madam," said Percival quietly. "I came to you to—to offer you the cabinet."

"To offer me the cabinet! I had to let it go because I was poor. I am still too poor to buy it back, Mr. Pemblebury."

"Won't you please accept it from me? I didn't expect that you would buy it. It is yours. I know from the price I gave Israels for it that he did not give you a fraction of its real value," Percival replied.

"But, Mr. Pemblebury," the lady said softly, "are you so rich that you can go about the world giving presents to strangers?"

"I don't propose making a present," Percival insisted. "I only wish to make restitution."

"Of something you have bought with your own money. Are you, then, so wealthy?"

"I'm an artist," said Percival simply.

"You are in any case an artist in generosity, Mr. Pemblebury," Mrs. Fotheringill said in a gentle way. "What do you think the cabinet is worth?"

"I've had an offer of two hundred guineas for it," Percival mumbled.

"And you expect me to accept a present from you worth two hundred guineas—from you, a complete stranger! You are an amazing young man, Mr. Pemblebury."

"I paid Israels only seventeen pounds ten for it."

"Which is ten pounds more than he allowed me for it."

"The old swindler!" gasped Percival. "Please, please, Mrs. Fotheringill. Won't you take it back?"

"How can I, my dear boy? It wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be just. Since you are clever enough to buy a cabinet worth two hundred guineas for seventeen in the open market you are entitled to make what profit you can. I can not see how you are to be blamed for the fact that I fell ill and got in debt and had to part with the cabinet in order to justify an old Jew who had the collecting of the money. No, no! You are a dear, kind boy—and I admire the generous impulse that has brought you on such an errand to me—but the cabinet is yours. I can not take it."

"But—but, Mrs. Fotheringill," stammered Per-

cival, "isn't there any sentimental attachment——?"

"Not a bit," said the lady stoutly. "Sir George was my very good friend—he and my husband were at school together. But his cabinet would be out of place in a tiny cottage like mine, and I have his photographs—some dozens, I should think. Poor dear, he religiously used to send me a signed copy of each new one he had taken! I have these if I want to remind myself of him."

"Oh!" said Percival faintly, with a sudden empty feeling in his interior. "Sandham gave me to understand——"

"Sandham probably is like the rest of the men who were at the Westminster with George Bingham—inclined to make a god of a man whose virtues were all on the surface. Don't think me heartless, Mr. Pemblebury. You see, I knew George Bingham better than most people. He never stopped acting—even off the stage. It was his fancy to play protector to his old friend's widow. He used to propose to me regularly, knowing very well that my heart was in a grave—a sailor's grave somewhere in the Pacific. He would have been the most astonished and dumfounded man alive if I had accepted him. Indeed, I once told him, out of mischief, that I would need time to think his proposal over. He was so scared that he kept away for months."

She laughed softly on a note that for a moment made Percival's heart stand still.

"No, no, you nice, kind boy," the lady went on. "There is no need for you to imagine I'll break my heart over the cabinet. Keep it or sell it, just as you like."

"If I sell it," said Percival "will you share the proceeds with me?"

"No," was the definite reply, "I can't do that. The cabinet is yours."

For a space Percival was silent. There was something in the figure silhouetted against the window that was familiar to him. The almost boyish grace with which the gold-encircled head was held on the slim neck, the brave poise of it on the shapely shoulders, was something that he had seen elsewhere only thrice in his life: first, on the night of his adventure in the square of Victorian houses, and twice later in the restaurant of L'Escargot d'Or. Mrs. Fotheringill was strangely like Myrtle Gililland. His heart jumped at the thought.

"Are you," he began to ask from a dry throat, "are you—Myrtle's mother?"

"Come over to me," the lady said quietly, "and look at my face in the light."

Percival rose from his chair and crossed to the window. As he came near the lady turned her head to the light, and Percival saw two eyes which were

pools of violet, a little sunk in circles of duskiness that spoke of illness. The nose was faintly aquiline.

"Yes," said Percival, "you must be Myrtle's mother."

"I am, as you say, Myrtle's mother. I have much to thank you for. Myrtle has told me about that man Bailey, and how you acted so bravely and efficiently that night. Then how sweet of you to think of me in the matter of the cabinet! Percival, how much do you care for my girl?"

"So much that it is an actual ache," said Percival.

"I believe you," said the mother of Myrtle. "Go and tell her. You'll find her in the room opposite. When you have finished telling her bring her to me."

II

With her back to the light Myrtle sat at the window of the room, with some needlework in her hands. Save that the gold of her hair was brighter, more alive, and that the curves of her figure were more round and youthful, the likeness was exact. There was the same brave poise, almost boyish, of the small head, the same graceful column of neck on the same shapely shoulders. For a moment Percival stood still by the door of the room.

"Oh!" said Myrtle, and her needlework fell into her lap.

Percival walked over to her and knelt at her feet, and his head came down until it rested in the soft folds of the material she was sewing.

"The needle, my dear!" she whispered softly.

"I don't care," said Percival. "Feel I could blub with happiness."

"Me too!" whispered Myrtle.

"I love you till I am all aching with it," said Percival.

"Me too!" whispered Myrtle.

"Are you really my sweetheart?"

"Everything—every bit of me is yours, dear."

"It's too good to be true!" said Percival.

"And yet it is the truest thing in the world at this moment."

"I want you so!"

"You shall have me soon—for keeps!"

"I have nothing to offer you," he whispered humbly.

"You have everything in the world I want," said she with her fingers on the smooth hair of his head. "Don't kneel to me, dear!"

"I must kneel to you—all my life."

"I'm kneeling to you—in my heart," she whispered.

He lifted his head for the first time.

"Is it like that with you—for me?"

"Why, yes. My heart is like a singing bird."

"That's marvelous. For me?"

"All for you, dear. Not a corner of it left—almost not even for Mother, who's so dear."

"Isn't she!"

"Yes, isn't she! But she won't be jealous. She understands. She loved my father—still loves him—as I love you—as I shall love you."

"Oh, I kiss your dear hands," said he, with his lips on them.

"I wish I could hold my heart in them," said Myrtle. "I wish I could put my life in them."

"Where may I find your heart, then?" he asked.

"Here," she whispered, her lips close to his.

Then: "Hold me close, dear. Never let me go. Keep me all my life close to you and remember when we get old that I did not play with you, but gave you my heart at once. I might have fobbed you off—pretended to be coy. But I can't—I couldn't. It is too real to me for pretence. My heart is on my sleeve."

"And mine too."

"When I first saw you I thought you were the most self-possessed man alive," said she. "Why, dear, you are like a little boy."

"I thought I had never seen any girl with such poise myself," Percival whispered. "But, dear, you are like a little girl."

"I couldn't pretend to you. I love you too much."

"Nor I to you—for the same reason. Must I wait a long time for you?"

"Not long, dear—not long. I could give you everything—now. I wish I had more to give you—that I were prettier. For your sake I wish my face might have 'launched a thousand ships'! I wish I could be the most desirable woman in the world—for you."

"You are the most desirable woman in the world, for me. Helen, with all the topless towers of Ilium, was small potatoes. When shall we be married?"

"Find the quickest way, dear!" she cried. Then, with her hands on her lips: "How brazen I am! You won't despise me by and by for loving you so plainly?"

"I'll tell the dimple at the corner of your mouth what I think of you," said Percival.

III

"We shan't have much to begin with," Percival explained, "but I shan't take long to be famous."

"Why, dear," said Myrtle, "you *are* famous. Didn't you see what *The Morning Leader* said about your picture in the spring show at the St. James's Gallery?"

"No."

"They call it the greatest picture of the year.

When I saw that in *The Leader* I went down to the village and bought all the papers I could think of. They are all raving about you."

"Let me see," said Percival.

She brought the journals to him, and they pored over them on the floor of the room, her fair hair brushing his dark head.

"Listen to this one," cried Myrtle. "'For breadth of conception and brilliance of execution Mr. Percival Pemblebury's *Limehouse Reach* (48) is easily the finest piece of painting we have seen this year. We can think of no master, nor of any school, whence Mr. Pemblebury has derived his astonishing technique. He stands on a pinnacle of his own making. We know of no artist more sincere.'"

"I seem to have knocked that fellow all right," Percival grinned. "Is my head swelling visibly?"

"I expect the process is more gradual," said Myrtle. "These notices are wonderful. An actor would go mad over such a Press."

"There's a funny thing about that picture," Percival said. "I have just thought of it. I was so immersed in painting it that I could not devote any time to making money. The result was that I got into debt with old Laverdet. If he hadn't ticked me off I'd never have sat down to do a drawing for *The Faun.* If I hadn't done that drawing for *The*

Faun I should never have had the verses to do for that double-spread and if I hadn't had the verses to do Dan Figgis, the ex-champion of England, would not have taken any notice of me at the fight in the stadium. In that case I should have gone home earlier. Which means that I should never have met you."

"What a horrible thought!" cried Myrtle in all sincerity. "Oh, Percival, if you hadn't turned up that night!"

He had, of course, to comfort her.

"It's a mighty queer thing, all the same," he said later on, "how a whole string of circumstances depend on one single thing. If I hadn't painted that picture I never should have allowed my debt to Laverdet to run up, and there would have been no boost of the Golden Snail. Poor Laverdet would still have been struggling on, getting deeper into the mire. I shouldn't have met Kitty Kintore, and should not have had the decoration to do for the new show at the Thespis. By the way, Myrtle, Miss Kintore wants to meet you. She is ready to find work for you, provided you want to carry on with a stage career."

Myrtle put her hand on his.

"Dear," she asked, "do you want me to go on with a stage career?"

"No," said Percival promptly. "But these are

modern days, and husbands don't hinder the pursuits of their wives. I'd hate to stand in your way."

"You are my way and my life," Myrtle said quietly. "When my mother married my father she gave up the stage. And when I marry you I too shall give it up. I'd like to meet Kitty Kintore, but I won't take any work from her."

"How blue your eyes are!" said Percival irrelevantly.

"They're gray!"

"They're blue at this moment," Percival insisted. "Which reminds me that I have written you a rondeau in the Doric, no doubt under the influence of Farquhar, a Scots friend of mine who is a sculptor."

"In the Doric?"

"Yes, in the language of Burns and Allan Ramsay."

He put his hand into his breast pocket and brought out a sheet of paper. He spread this out on the floor in front of them, and together they read, fair hair brushing the black:

"D'ye ken this? My sweetheart's e'en
Are just the bonniest ever seen,
Limpid as cornflowers, bravely blue,
Peekin' the mists o' mornin' through,
Nestlin' the gowdenin' stalks between.

"Her kindlin' glance sae straight and clean
I dearly love—but ah! the sheen
When laughin' tears thae orbs bedew!
D'ye ken this?

"Maist roun' the sworlin' warld I've been,
But ne'er in face of lass or queen
Were e'en tae match in set or hue
My sweetheart's. Lord! there maun be few
Wi' eyes like hers—blue pools serene!
D'ye ken this?"

Myrtle lifted to her lover a face that was aglow.

"Is this for me?" she whispered.

"For whom else?" he asked as softly.

"It's lovely—lovely!" she said sincerely, being beyond all capacity for criticism. "I never thought it possible that I could love anybody as I love you. Do you care for me as much as all that?"

"Come closer," said Percival, "and I'll whisper it to your dimple."

THE END